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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

Three newspaper headlines on three different days this week add up to an eerie little saga of 20th-century nonsense that would surely astound and fascinate 28th-century historians struggling to comprehend our quaint folkways.

The first comes from *The Wall Street Journal*, Monday, June 23, 1986:

Prototype Vaccine
For AIDS Is Said
To Offer Promise

Then, from the *Journal* again, the following day:

AIDS Has Spread
"Almost Everywhere"
In Africa, Zaire Doctor Tells Parley

And finally, from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Thursday, June 26:

Bill to Help AIDS Research
Is Stalled by Lawyers' Group

What a splendid demonstration of the complexities of our era these three pieces are! Historians of the distant future — if mankind has a distant future — will probably look back on us as transitional figures in the evolution of human society, placing us midway between the prehistory of the caves and the true civilization that they represent. Close inspection of these newspaper clippings can leave no doubt of that.

Consider them in order.

The AIDS-vaccine story shows 20th-century science closing in on yet another miraculous accomplishment. The gene-splicing researchers of Genentech, Inc., a San Francisco-based pioneer in genetic manipulation, are using cells from the Chinese hamster, onto which they splice the gene that makes gp120, a major protein that coats the virus responsible for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. (Genentech had announced a few months earlier that it had succeeded in synthesizing the gp120 protein.) A vaccine made from this artificially created substance has, in test-tube experiments, killed the AIDS virus and prevented it from infecting human immune-system cells.

Of course, Genentech cautioned, plenty of work remains to be done. The vaccine is a long way from being ready to test on human beings. First would come laboratory tests: vaccinating animals — mice first, perhaps, and then chimpanzees — and then attempting to infect them with AIDS. Even if the mice and chimps show an ability to resist the deadly disease, though, said a Genentech scientist, "There is the possibility that humans or chimps could respond differently from rodents and may not mount the same neutralizing antibody response because immune systems vary." Nevertheless, early analysis of the vaccine gives reason for optimism. At least on the test-tube level, it does kill the virus. A promising beginning in the campaign

against this most contemporary of terrifying plagues has been made.

The next day's story leaped back from the shining science-fiction world of gene-splicing into prehistory.

More than 6% of the population of Africa, said a Zairean doctor addressing the second annual International Conference on AIDS in Kinshasa, has been infected with the AIDS virus, and the disease, once thought confined to pockets in central and eastern Africa, now has spread "almost everywhere" on that continent. Some 50,000 Africans may already be suffering from AIDS — more than twice the number so far diagnosed in the United States — but the scope of the epidemic in Africa is difficult to measure, the conference was told, because some African countries don't officially recognize the disease or keep precise count of the victims, nor do they have the sophisticated laboratories needed for diagnosis.

In the United States, AIDS is still primarily a disease of homosexuals. Not so in Africa, where it afflicts mainly heterosexuals. 60% of the female prostitutes in Kenya are infected, said Dr. Bela Kapita of Zaire, and 90% of those in Rwanda. Although sexual intercourse is the main means of transmission, the spread of AIDS in Africa is furthered also by the careless reuse of hypodermic needles in medical establishments and by the continued practice of ornamental scarification.

On one side of the world, scientists are splicing genes. On the other, primitive tribesfolk are still carving decorative scars into their flesh — giving themselves a fatal disease in the process — while their supposedly more sophisticated cousins in the medical clinics are casually employing used needles when giving injections. What a

century of contradictions we live in!

But wait. There's more.

The gene-splicers work in California. In that very same highly advanced outpost of civilization, the state legislature is currently debating a bill that would provide \$6 million in state funds to cover the cost of clinical testing of an AIDS vaccine, and other funds to support its development. The bill also includes a limit on the legal liability of the companies manufacturing the vaccine so that patients who become ill as a result of using it would be restrained to some degree from suing. This would be achieved by a declaration that the AIDS vaccine is an "unavoidably dangerous drug." Any one injured by it would have to prove negligence on the part of the manufacturer in order to be awarded damages. This would set aside the so-called "doctrine of strict liability," which holds a manufacturer responsible for damages caused by its products even when no negligence is involved, and make the AIDS vaccine essentially a use-at-your-own-risk product.

The gene-splicing companies say they must have this protection if they are going to venture into the unknown territory of AIDS-vaccine production. Otherwise, exposed to multimillion-dollar lawsuits if unexpected side effects turn up in even a few instances, they would find themselves uninsurable and would risk bankruptcy if they succeeded in putting an AIDS vaccine on the market. Faced with such uncertainties, they see powerful disincentives for continued AIDS-vaccine research.

(The market for an AIDS vaccine, it should be noted, would not be those who are already infected with the apparently incurable disease, but rather those who are currently untouched and fear contracting it.

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Vaccines developed for other illnesses have occasionally caused cases of the very disease they are meant to ward off: not often, but occasionally.)

While the California Assembly debates the liability issue, the California Trial Lawyers Association has let its position be known. It opposes any limitation in the liability of companies manufacturing an AIDS vaccine. "If someone is damaged, I can't give them back what they've lost," declared an official of the lawyers' group, "but I can go to court and win damages. Our concern is about the 200 million Americans who will be taking this vaccine to try to prevent the dreaded AIDS." A reduction in potential damage awards would quite likely reduce the potential income of the lawyers who specialize in such suits.

If the lawyers have their way, AIDS-vaccine producers will carry a heavy burden of risk for any failure of their product. It would be wiser for them to forgo working toward an AIDS vaccine altogether and to find some less chancy field of research. So an interesting philosophical debate is shaping up in the California legislature. And while the philosophers puzzle over the degree of financial risk that those who hope to end the threat of AIDS must bear, Americans die every day of this startling new disease, while in Africa an entire continent seems to be facing exposure, in part because certain unhygienic prehistoric methods of bodily decoration are still in wide use. Beyond doubt the historians of the 28th century, looking back at our strange times, will find much to comment about here. Unless, of course, AIDS has made the 28th century an irrelevant concept. •

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Inflections

The Readers

Readers and writers, take note!
Please be aware that all materials — manuscript submissions, letters to the editor, subscription problems — should now be sent to our Wisconsin office: Amazing® Stories, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

It was a pleasure to meet you at the Science Fiction Writers of America conference in Berkeley. Thank you for the time you spent talking with me Saturday about my "hard science" vs. "soft science" concerns, and about the humanitarian value of science fiction. This latter issue is one I heard not much discussion of elsewhere during the conference, so caught up were we in the issues of marketability and royalty statements. I was delighted to find that you, editor of a major voice in the genre, trouble to think about what SF means and why the heck we're writing and reading it.

After having written nine young adult novels, my first steps into the new world of science fiction are very exciting for me. Thanks again for the valuable information and insight you passed along.

Cordially,
Kathryn Makris
516 S. Cascade Terrace
Sunnyvale CA 94087

Kathryn, we also enjoyed making your acquaintance and hope that you do well in your new writing endeavors.

As for the humanitarian aspect of science fiction, well, that's an important issue for us, especially when evaluating a fiction submission. Granted that the very natures of science fiction and fantasy dictate the presence of scientific principles, new or alien technologies, or magic — so as to differentiate these genres from, say, romance or Westerns — yet these principles, technologies, and magic aren't all there is to good science-fiction or fantasy literature. We, as readers, need to see how the characters deal with these elements in order to both overcome the crisis at hand and understand something about themselves or the society in which they live. Without this focus, the story becomes pointless, and we would rather read a textbook on some scientific issue or occult matter. Yes, literature should entertain, but SF literature should also enlighten us about the universe — both its workings and its inhabitants.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

I am 14 years old and an avid fan of science fiction and fantasy. *Amazing® Stories* magazine is the only story magazine I read because I think the others have something lacking. I would really like to see *Amazing Stories* advertised more regularly. It is too good to be kept in the dark.

I am the only person I know who reads *Amazing Stories*, and I do not have a subscription, but I hope to eventually. Only one store around here

carries the magazine, and it usually has three or four copies on hand. If I don't get there three or four days after the issues appear in the store, those copies are all gone and I miss that issue.

I admit that I first heard about *Amazing Stories* and bought an issue because the television series was soon to be aired, but after I read that first issue, I could only hope that the TV series would be as exciting and imaginative as the magazine was. That issue was the November 1985 one, and since then I've been addicted. The stories are well written and very good. Your stories must live up to a high standard, for they have not failed yet. I've enjoyed the poetry, especially the poems by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre. I also like to write, and I've learned a lot from you. Thanks for keeping me out of the streets, and thanks for a great magazine.

I do have one question. Do you put out an *Amazing Stories* calendar every year? I've enjoyed mine very much, and the artwork is impeccable.

Sincerely,
Helen A. Lee
2700 Lockridge Drive
Lawrence KS 66046

Helen, we're glad to hear from you, for you are a prime example that our younger audience wants to be nourished by good, solid SF, not by the pabulum offered on Saturday-morning SF cartoon shows or by the current cinema glut of so-called space adventures.

As for the calendar, alas, we have published only the 1986 Amazing Stories calendar. Currently, future releases of such a product have not been discussed.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Hail, Patrick Lucien Price!
I don't suppose you were hatched

yet in October 1926, when I picked up my first issue of *AmS* — or it picked up me. *AmS* was the way we abbreviated *Amazing Stories* in the pioneering days. I've been religiously collecting the original SF magazine ever since. Actually, I suppose, I should say irreli-giously, being a born-again secular humanist since the age of 15. I've been a supporter of *AmS* since the time we called it scientifiction through the birth of "sci-fi" in 1954 to the present-day worldwide utilization of said abbreviation to characterize my favorite form of literature and cinema.

During 60 years, I've built, pre-served, and protected a "priceless collection" (Los Angeles chief librarian's estimation) of imaginative material: now 36,000 books, complete runs of 99% of the collectible professional periodicals, and uncountable fanzines from the first in 1932; 125,000 stills from imagi-movies plus 12,000 lobby-cards and the majority of fantastic motion picture onesheets from as far back as 1919; *in toto*, approximately 300,000 pieces. So I read with considerable interest Fred Lerner's worthy feature on how to take care of one's collection.

The only practical disagreement: I regard as unnecessary the well-meant counsel to avoid publicizing the wonders of one's collection in local prints for fear a mundane burglar might consider it an invitation to rob. What would be of any value to a thief? How would he dispose of a Frank R. Paul original, since the theft would be immediately made known in *Science Fiction Chronicle*? What library or university would purchase a complete hot set of *Amazing Stories*? To whom would the thief dispose an inscribed copy of Hugo Gernsback's *Ralph 124C41 +?*

I've had over 100,000 words' worth

of publicity about my collection published in newspapers and periodicals since 1931, and have been talking about the archives on TV ever since 1948 without any break-ins from mundane marauders. And I have never known Moskowitz or de la Rose or Kyle or Madle to shy away from publicity about their collections or to suffer any adverse events as a consequence. So stand tall and reveal all!

I rarely have time to *read* SF nowadays (as I approach my 70th birthday in November), but I would continue to buy *Amazing Stories* for the Barrvelous illustrations if nothing else.

Sciencerely,
Forrest J Ackerman
2495 Glendower Avenue
Hollywood CA 90027

Perhaps you have a point, Forrest, but as you stated, Fred's statement was well meant. Unfortunately, in our current society, not everyone respects the belongings of his neighbors. This we know all too well, having been the victim of a recent burglary. Though some items may not have a dollar value, they have personal significance. And when one's privacy has been violated, trust in humankind diminishes. And so, Fred's comment might serve as a security blanket for some of us.

— *Patrick Lucien Price*

Dear Mr. Price:

I would like to thank you for your critique of the material that I have submitted to *Amazing Stories*. I am very grateful for your evaluation of my work and very receptive to your comments, especially since I know that you don't have to do it.

For years I had been involved in writing nonfiction articles for three country-music publications. Most of

my work sold and was published. There, however, was no guidance offered by the editors of these magazines. Simply a check, three copies, or a rejection slip.

Being a music publisher, I realize the enormous amount of time spent on reviewing new material. This is why I find it unique that a busy man, as you must be, takes the time for personal consideration instead of the usual TBNT form-letter.

I just felt that I had to write and let you know how much I appreciate your turning my first serious attempts at writing fiction into a wonderful learning experience. THANK YOU!

Sincerely,
Mike Reckard
819 W. Rosal Place
Chandler AZ 85224

Yup, Mike, you're right. Learning from the errors you've made in a manuscript is a good learning experience, for it teaches you what sort of things to avoid in future stories. However, selling a story is a better learning experience — not to mention a more profitable one — for that reinforces what you've done properly. And personally, we prefer positive reinforcement.

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you are reading this magazine for personal enjoyment. Also, feel free to respond to other issues — be they about writing, the SF and fantasy community, or the general state of affairs in the world at large. We do value your opinions, though we may not agree with them. So, write us!

Till next issue.
— *Patrick Lucien Price*



Among the Stones

by Paul J. McAuley

art: Hank Jankus



Paul J. McAuley's "The Airs of Earth" was featured in our January 1986 issue. The present story shares the same general future history and takes place some thirty years earlier.

The author is one of those SF writers who are also practicing scientists: he is a cell biologist.

It was almost sunset when the hunters reached the devastated valley. They had been riding through the brilliant jambles of the Crystal Sea for half the short day towards the mysterious column of smoke, and as they neared it they began to talk amongst themselves for the first time in hours, swapping artless speculations about its cause, wondering who could have set such a beacon. There were half a dozen of them, men and women in colourful loose robes of a synthetic material, strips of the same stuff binding their long hair from their darkly tanned faces, long-barrelled rifles with ornately carved stocks strapped at their backs, leather pouches of shot and powder at their hips. Their horses stepped uneasily amongst the glittering blocks and outcrops, the slabs and spires of crystal, shying now and then from ghostly reflections.

When the hunters reached the source of the smoke the red sun had reached the southern horizon; around them crystals burned with sullen cold fire. One by one the hunters reined in their mounts at the top of a long slope, looking down into a small valley. In its centre, like the bullseye of a target, was a blackened crater, thin smoke rippling up from its hidden depths to smear the sunset. Crystal spires which had jutted all over the valley's sandstone floor had been toppled. In every direction they pointed away from the crater, the facets of the nearest discoloured by some great heat.

The hunters dismounted and hobbled their mounts and cautiously descended, here and there finding fragments of fused metal. None dared approach the crater; the one who ventured closest burnt her hand when she touched the slagged base of a toppled spire.

There was nothing there that the hunters could understand, except that some fierce but local catastrophe must have taken place in the valley that day, but they were reluctant to leave the place, having ridden so hard to reach it. They ranged wider, crossing the valley and picking amongst the fallen spires there, and then climbing the slope. And then, beyond the crest of the slope, in a cairn of tilted prisms, they found a survivor of the devastation.

He lay with his arms crossed on his forehead as if to shade his eyes. His nose was broken and one cheek had been ripped from top to bottom; blood soaked the left leg of his coveralls from knee to ankle. He lay so still that at first the hunters thought him dead, but when the woman with the burnt hand touched his throat she was surprised to find a pulse there.

The hunters carried the man in a sling between two horses as they rode back through rough crystal spurs towards the escarpment, three of them leading the way with sputtering torches. They believed that they knew the reason for the crater, and wondered how the man could have survived the crash of his flying machine, and why he would have been flying over the Crystal Sea at the beginning of winter: they knew well enough that the off-world tourist season had ended.

As the party began to climb the escarpment (the ruins atop it clawing at the full moon), the man briefly returned to consciousness, cried out to someone. But when the woman hunter touched his hand reassuringly the man fainted again. The woman sighed and tucked a cloth around the man's battered face to protect his wounds from the dust-laden wind.

The party traversed the dark escarpment with the wind beating at their backs and descended through a narrow ravine to the entrance of the caves. The man was lifted from the sling and carried through the network of passages, despite the late hour accompanied by a growing crowd who shouted questions none of which the hunters could answer.

The man was laid on a pallet in a little niche, and the headswoman, Mistress Armiger, arrived. Despite his wounds she recognised him at once, a guide from the capital on the other side of the Crystal Sea. She remembered the woman he had brought to the city above and believed that she knew what had happened.

Mistress Armiger asked an old woman to tend to the man, and told the rest of the crowd to return to their beds. "Come to me if he wakes," she said to the old woman. "He may not live long and I'd like to know how he came to this end."

The man did not wake, but neither did he grow weaker. The headswoman was in the midst of preparations for winter, when all must be made secure before the gales of the overturn, but once or twice a day she came to stand at the pallet where he lay still. Mistress Armiger was sure that it would mean trouble for her people if it was known in the outside world that the guide had survived, but she was not without compassion, and besides there was a tenuous bond between them, perhaps no more substantial than the miasma of the gin with which the guide had placated her when bringing tourists to the city above, but nonetheless compelling.

The wind blew more steadily, a rising howl at the mouth of the passage to the outside, and soon the headswoman's charity did not matter, for everywhere on Ruby things had ground to a halt as people sheltered from the winter storms. The headswoman, when all the accounting had been done, sat beside the guide's pallet for at least an hour each day, waiting for some sign, or waiting for the man to die.

For it was possible that he might not survive his ordeal; no infection had set in any of his wounds, but the skin had sunken in his eyesockets and the root of his skull's grin showed through. He slept most of the time and

showed no sign of knowing where he was when he did wake, taking no nourishment but a few mouthfuls of cold soup — and most of that dribbled out of his nostrils. The old woman who tended him was worried that he would die and told the headswoman so at length, but Mistress Armiger shrugged. If the guide died it was God's will: like all the villagers, living on the edge of things, she was a fatalist.

But the guide did not die, although when he came to himself he thought at first that he was dead. It was night (the villagers clung to the habit of diurnal rhythms in the caves) and he was alone in darkness so complete that he could not see his hand when he brought it close to his eyes. He touched his strangely skewed nose, then explored the rest of his face, found the deep, healed gash on his cheek. He touched the goatskin throw that covered him, heard the distant wind-whine, breathed in damp, stale air. He remembered his name, Nathan Kemperer, and remembered Juana, who was dead, and began to weep for her.

Perhaps he slept, for when he opened his eyes he saw in the flickering light of an oil-lamp the headswoman peering down at him. "Welcome, Mister Kemperer," the woman said gravely, and the guide attempted a smile, unaware of how ghastly it was.

Mistress Armiger began to ask him questions, but something had gone out of Kemperer and he did not answer her. Presently she shrugged and summoned an old woman who fed him soup a spoonful at a time. The headswoman watched him narrowly, a hawk brooding on her prey. Perhaps she still hoped that Kemperer would speak, but when the soup was finished Kemperer lay back and closed his eyes.

Mistress Armiger was patient and sat with Kemperer whenever she could, watching and waiting. But Kemperer said nothing, staring up at the rock of the ceiling or submitting to the attentions of the old woman with the silent stoicism of a small child.

After a few days he had recovered enough to hobble about with the aid of a crutch, and soon the villagers had become used to his lurching progress through the sandy-floored caves where they had transplanted their households, to his battered face marked by a livid levin-stroke from the corner of his left eye to the angle of the jaw, to his tattered coveralls that one day were replaced by robes like the villagers' own, fashioned from fabrics culled from the city above, their colours unfaded after five hundred years. The headswoman assigned one of the boys who next year would take the test of adulthood to watch Kemperer, and often they were to be found at the beginning of the long passage that led to the outside, the boy watching the man who sat with his head bowed, perhaps listening to the wind endlessly fluting the mouth-piece of the caves. Kemperer would sit that way for hours, then abruptly heave himself up and hobble off without a glance at his companion.

The winter passed. Men and women chanted the old hymns as they

pounded grain, pestle on mortar providing the rhythm, while the hunters sat cross-legged as they mended their guns and cast shot. At any time a dozen tiny forge-fires were smoking, the caverns ringing with the sound of worked metal, filled with the sweet stench of molten lead as it was poured into moulds bedded in the sandy floor. Children tended the goats penned in a couple of the larger caverns and sought out eggs that hens had laid in the crevices, while the youngest ran naked amongst the blanket partitions or sat patiently as their mothers painted elaborate, beautiful patterns on their backs.

The wounded stranger, Kemperer, limped through all this without a word, the boy always a few paces behind: winter passed and Kemperer never spoke. It was as if that faculty had been cut off when Juana had died. In the face of that terrible reality there could be no words. But winter passed. The days drew out from the solstitial minimum of less than an hour; the storms began to die. It was spring again.

The sound of the wind had been falling so subtly that as always the villagers were surprised when some of the youngsters returned after having ventured outside. One carried, as one had always carried since the villagers had settled there, a green twig, sign that the winter-slackened reins of life were once again tightening across the land. The boy who had been watching Kemperer, his name was Mark, had been amongst the little expedition, and he pushed through the excited crowd to where Kemperer stood, his torn face averted, apart from the rest.

"Soon we'll be out of the smoke and goatshit," Mark told him. "We've been up to the ridge: we've seen the city!"

A spasm twisted Kemperer's scarred face; then he pushed past Mark and quickly limped towards the cave entrance. Mark followed, frowning, as Kemperer clambered up the long slope of the passage, a shadow against the wan sunlight.

Outside, a constant wind blew and the air was still full of dust. The sun was a lopsided smear high overhead. Kemperer clutched a smooth boulder, panting hard and looking at the curtains of dust sweeping across the Ilyrian Sink. When at last he turned Mark stepped back: his eyes were glittering with unshed tears.

"I thought I was dead," Kemperer said roughly. "I really thought . . ." Then he began to cry.

After a moment, uncertainly, Mark reached out and patted Kemperer's shoulder. His long vigil was over: soon he would know what had happened.

It is rarely given to a man to know the precise time when his life is changed, but afterwards Nathan Kemperer could pin it exactly: sunset on the twelfth of September. He knew because he had been watching the autochthons' daily procession to the edge of the capital when the girl came

in.

From Kemperer's solitary vantage, sitting at the window of the Solar Café atop the Two Worlds Hotel, the dozen black-robed figures, led by a man who with the flat of his hands solemnly beat and beat a hide-covered drum, looked like ants (Kemperer's wife had once told him about ants) as they marched across the great plaza below. The view was partly obscured by a flickering light laid on the glass by the turning hologram of the Earth in the centre of the café, and the window muffled the solemn drumbeats, made them faint as another's heartbeat.

Poor bastards, Kemperer thought, and sipped his bitter water. The desert tribes on the fringes of the Crystal Sea had been the last to encounter the reconstruction efforts of the Earth, and the least able to cope. Ostensibly, the procession went out each evening to celebrate the glory of the sun setting across the Crystal Sea, but its real intent was to graft from the tourists. Not that there were many tourists now. It was the end of the season, the tipping of the year.

The procession slowly shuffled out of sight and Kemperer turned back to watch the phantom globe. He had never been to Earth, but he could easily picture its endless blue oceans, the platinum coin of its sun, pine trees like serried armies defending the snow-tipped peaks of the mountains. . . . His wife had been from the Pan-Canadian Hegemony; towards the end that was all she had talked about and that was probably where she was now. Ruby had advanced a long way with the help of the Earth, but it had not advanced far enough to hold Kemperer's wife.

Kemperer checked his chronometer: the autochthons might be poor bastards, but they kept reasonable time. It was almost sunset, so most of the marks left would be watching the Crystal Sea. There were only a handful of people in the café, almost all pimps or winchells or, like Kemperer, guides. He was wondering whether he should invest in another mineral water when the girl came in.

Tall and slender as a flower, she paused in the mote-filled beams that intersected at the high platform of the entrance, her heart-shaped face pale against glossy black hair which, combed to one side, spilled down her yellow tunic suit. A wide-shouldered man came in behind her and the little noises of the café started again, although most of the people were still watching the girl, now descending the turning staircase. Momentarily she was eclipsed by the Earth; then she dawned on its far edge. Kemperer, surprised, set down his glass and stood, for she was heading towards him.

"Seyour Kemperer?"

"Sure." Her face, he thought, really *is* heart-shaped. A white blossom was tucked behind one ear, vivid against her hair.

"Let's sit," the girl suggested, and her burly companion pulled back a chair, stepping docilely to one side as she took it. There was something funny about the focus of his eyes . . . and then Kemperer registered the

small metal plates, one on each temple, beneath his straight-cut fringe.

"Tell me," the girl said, "about the crystals. Do they really sing?"

"Some better than others, and I know the best."

"So I was told." To her bodyguard: "A small coffee, Igor."

The man moved away and Kemperer watched him go.

"He's quite safe," the girl said. She was smiling.

"I've never seen one before, that's all."

"I suppose they don't have them here yet. Even on Earth there aren't that many outside the prison camps. But my friend" — there was a slight dip in her voice, a flutter — "has a good deal of influence. He makes me take Igor with me whenever I go out."

"And your friend will visit the Sea as well?"

"Oh no." She laughed. "He doesn't care about things like that. He doesn't even go to watch the sunset, and we've been here three days. No, this is my trip. You'll take me?"

"Of course, Seyoura. When would you like to go?"

The bodyguard returned, set down a cup and saucer pinched between forefinger and thumb, and then stepped back, moving with a remote, minimal grace. The girl looked at him and asked, "Is tomorrow morning all right?"

"... All right," the bodyguard confirmed.

"I might not know much about them, but I could have sworn they can't talk."

"Usually he can't, but at the moment he's connected to the computers in my friend's suite." The girl dismissed this with a languid elegant flick of her hand. "When shall we go?"

Kemperer suggested a time which she thought awfully early. "I show only the best, Seyoura, and this year the best is a long way from here."

She smiled. "I was told you were the best guide."

"May I ask who told you?"

"Oh, someone at a reception. Then my friend had you checked out, to make sure you're as safe as Igor."

"Igor . . . ?"

"He doesn't really have a name, not any more. That's just my joke." Her smile deepened. "He murdered more than twenty people: that's what put him under the wire. Now: I must fly. Another reception. Where do we meet?"

Kemperer told her and stood when she left, the bodyguard like a shadow at her back. She had not touched her coffee, and as Kemperer frugally sipped it, a familiar voice said, "You bastard. How do you do it?"

The flaps of her leather jacket loose about the shelf of her bust, Anne Donovan, the Pilot (and by extension the Guide) Guild Master, sat across from Kemperer. She added, "You know who that was?"

"No. Who was it?"

"Only the companion of Julio Amarez. Some Earth whore he's sweet on. You better not make her airsick tomorrow, Kemperer, or you'll end up in an alley with a dog pissing in your mouth." Donovan ran a thumbnail beneath the lowest of her several chins and winked. She had long, delicately curled eyelashes, incongruous in her course cheerful face.

"Come on," Kemperer said uneasily: and he had cause to feel uneasy. Although Amarez was from Earth, he was neither tourist, nor politician, nor businessman. All summer he had been trying to muscle in on the skilled labour pools of the cities of the southern plains, attempting to replace their Guilds with something called the United Workers Confederation. Nothing had been pinned on Amarez, but several Guild Masters had been killed in gruesomely imaginative ways that summer; the man was ruthless, no doubt about it.

Donovan said, "It strikes me that there's a question of whether you should accept her as a client."

"She asked fairly, came to me through a former client's recommendation. It's late in the season, Anne. I'm glad to get what I can."

"I mean morally," Donovan said, pursing her mouth in reproach. "Because of what Amarez is trying to do to us. You joined that thing of his yet?"

"Well, yes, but it was that or lose my landing rights. So I signed — just like everyone else."

Donovan sighed. She was a scrupulously honest woman, outflanked and outgunned by Amarez but still stubbornly fighting. The Guilds had always been cooperative rather than coercive, and it went against her instincts to try and persuade her associates to take an unpopular course of action. She said, "Taking this whore is like saying you're for this thing of Amarez's. You should show more respect for your colleagues."

"Look, I respect you, I respect every guide in the room — except Ham Beaumont over there, because he's forgotten he owes me ten dollars. I can look after myself, Anne, and I don't see what harm this does. I tell you what: if Amarez wants to come, I won't let him."

"You think you're a funny guy," Donovan said, "but the funny thing is, you really aren't."

Kemperer was a little hurt. He liked Donovan and didn't want to get into a row with her. "Suggest something practical and I'll see what I can do."

"Try and find out what Amarez is planning next. What he's up to here."

"I don't think the girl will know anything about that, if she's really what you say she is. Besides, she'll have that bodyguard with her." Really, Kemperer didn't want to become involved. He was a solitary person, and like many such disguised his loneliness with an affected disinterest in the affairs of others. Donovan's jibe about showing respect had touched him more deeply than he cared to admit.

Donovan shrugged; her leather jacket creaked. "We've all got to do our

best, Kemperer."

"Well, I'll try." No, he didn't mean it at all. Kemperer drained the rest of the coffee; it was cold and bitter but he swallowed it anyway, smiling at Donovan through the taste.

The girl was late the next day, but that was her prerogative; when she finally arrived in the passenger lounge and began to apologise, Kemperer told her it was nothing, nothing at all. She wore a close-cut bodysuit cinched with a golden belt; lights blinked and spun in her piled-up black hair. Kemperer hardly noticed her bodyguard, hovering a discreet half a dozen paces away, the terminals on his forehead gleaming in the overhead lights as his head turned back and forth, back and forth without a pause, as continuously alert as a lizard.

The airport shared the pocket of dead air in the lee of the city's dome with the spaceport, and as Kemperer led the girl and her bodyguard across the stained concrete towards his jumpjet a liner went up ahead of them, a vast silver sphere wallowing in the faint violet beam of the gravithic projectors.

The girl watched it until it had vanished into the racing grey clouds. "I would have liked to be on that."

"Seyoura?"

"Oh, call me Juana, please."

"Wan . . . ?"

She smiled and gravely repeated her name. "I don't mean to be rude, Seyour Kemperer, but I've seen all I want of your planet. Is it true the winters are terrible here?"

"The axial tilt here is greater than Earth's, Seyoura, that is why the winters are so hard. It's true that it's dangerous to leave the cities because of the storms, but the days are very short in any case." He checked that she had done up her seatbelt correctly, glanced at the bodyguard in the rear seat.

She said above the rising whistle of the jets, "It might not be too safe in this city, this winter."

Kemperer wondered why she was telling him this; surely, in the circles she moved in, she knew how to be discreet. *Find out what Amarez is planning*, Donovan had asked, but with the chance before him, Kemperer was suddenly afraid. Amarez's reputation, the brooding presence of the bodyguard like morality in some *jongleur* play: Kemperer resolved in that moment to keep his distance, to do only what he was paid for.

He pushed the tiller forward and the jumpjet rose, the dome of the city falling away like a seashell discarded on the long shelf of the mesa, the Crystal Sea glittering out to the horizon under the grey sky. Kemperer explained that no one was quite sure how the Crystal Sea had been formed, that in a million years or so it would be entirely gone, eroded by the winter storms. He spoke automatically, unreeling sentences as he had unreeled them day after day that and previous summers, but he couldn't help glancing at the

girl now and then, her profile so keen against the light. Her lips were slightly parted in what might have been the beginning of a smile; she breathed a faint musk, an odour he thought might be that of the airs of fabled Earth. At last he fell silent and simply flew.

The Sea was not uniform. Here and there humps of sandstone rose from the general glitter like the backs of surfacing sea-beasts, some carved by the wind into towers or arches. Fossilised sand-dunes, each whorled as if bearing the impress of its creator, saddled away to the west, and Kemperer followed their edge until he came to the beginning of a long, dry valley and turned south for the final leg of the journey.

Kemperer was a conscientious guide. At the beginning of every season he took unnecessary risks to stake the best site, leaving the city immediately after the overturn, when the bending finger of a tornado might still touch down out of a clear sky or thunderstorms sweep across the Sea and fill its gullies in minutes with tawny torrents. The other guides, more prudent, swore at Kemperer for taking such risks, but grudgingly admitted that so far his craziness had always paid off. Although he knew, none better, that one spring he would luck out, it didn't matter: he was a guide, nothing more, and so he had to be the best.

The site Kemperer had chosen that season was not large, but it was one of the more beautiful. He parked the jumpjet on a level alluvial fan spread from the mouth of a high gully, and led Juana and the bodyguard through gardens of crystal spurs overgrown by thorny tendrils of rockrose. Further on the spurs were larger, like pieces of some gargantuan and immensely complicated game abandoned halfway through. A milky light seemed to live within their abraded facets, no brighter than the flexing sky.

The girl, Juana, was enchanted by these formations, exclaiming at chance resemblances to shattered faces or fabulous beasts, and at veins of impurities, mostly green oxides of copper, twisting through their milk. The bodyguard walked stolidly behind her, a detached shadow, a knife of darkness sliding through the heart of the light.

There was an irregular descent through sandstone levels, a narrow passage. Once Kemperer took Juana's hand to help her over a tumbled boulder and was surprised at how cool, how soft and flexible, her hand was. The touch remained on his fingertips, tingling, as they entered the grotto.

It was a declivity into which the crystal had intruded as slabs of fine, almost transparent material, more or less upright like the fanning leaves of a book, less than a handsbreadth in thickness but as high as a man and twice as long. All around the lip of the grotto milky crystal slumped over sandstone; the pure leaves below took this light and shattered it so that fragmented rainbows spun in and out of vision.

Kemperer watched indulgently as Juana wandered these brief aisles. The bodyguard stood beside him and kept touching one or other of the metal plates on his temples; once he made an abrupt gesture like a man trying to

brush an annoying insect from his face.

When at last Juana returned, she said, "It's enchanting."

"It won't last long, I'm afraid. I think it was buried by sand before last winter, and the storms that are coming will probably destroy it."

Beside Kemperer, the bodyguard fumbled at his forehead and Juana asked him what was wrong. The bodyguard, mute without the backup of his owner's computers, responded with hesitant hand-signals, pressing shapes into his palm with thick fingers.

Juana sighed and dismissed him. The bodyguard slowly turned and walked away down the narrow passage.

"Something is upsetting his sensory inputs," the girl said, "so he'll wait at your jumpjet. In a way it's a relief, because my friend interrogates Igor to find out what I've been doing when I go out. I hope I can trust you." She said this last in a lower voice, with a quick smile.

Kemperer smiled back. "It's probably the singing of the stones," he said, and explained that the crystals were doped with minute amounts of free metals which distorted their lattices, made them gigantic piezoelectric cells that generated weak radio waves in response to changes in temperature and air pressure. "Of course, most just put out noise. But some, like these, are orchestrated. They sing, although their song has to be translated."

"'And the low world in measur'd motion draw,' " the girl quoted, "'After the heavenly tune which none can hear, Of human mold with grosse unpurged ear.' "

Kemperer was surprised: in his limited experience whores did not quote Milton. But of course she was no ordinary whore.

"How do we hear them?" she asked.

"I will show." Kemperer began to unstow little balloons from his belt, breaking the capsule inside each and letting it drift up until half a dozen hung in the cold still air above the crystal slabs.

"The balloons are plated with solid-state speakers which respond to the output of the stones," he told Juana, and pressed the switch on his control unit which activated the system.

The stones sang.

Brittle chirps skittering over a shifting sinuous whine, like glass birds singing in a gale or the collapsing of distant stars against the omnipresent universal hiss, the fading sibilance of the Word from which the Universe had sprung. Bass chords, now in solemn clusters, now a single voice, the response of the crystals to stress in their bedrock. The balloons swayed and the song wound on, never the same, never ending.

Dreamily, Juana wandered amongst the bright slabs, her arms wrapped around herself, smiling slightly. Kemperer sat on a cold spur of sandstone and watched her indulgently.

At last she drifted back. "They *do* sing."

He nodded, his face tingling, and he was not at all surprised when she

leaned forward, annihilating the space between, and kissed him.

Afterwards Kemperer lay with his back on cold stone, hugging Juana and breathing her musk, and looking through the tangle of her hair at grey clouds pulling apart beyond the grotto's glistening lip. Well, now he had done it.

He had known as soon as she dismissed the bodyguard what was to come, but he had said nothing, done nothing, drawn to her like a sailor to a siren. It was not as if this kind of thing had never happened before — sometimes a female client would suggest spending the night out in the Sea and he had always felt free to accept or decline. It was a way of cancelling the hurt of his wife's desertion. But Kemperer didn't want to become involved with the companion of someone as ruthless as Amarez; and he wondered, as sweat cooled along his sides and Juana breathed gently in his ear, how he could tell her this could be the only time.

She rolled away and sat up, and began to comb her disarranged hair with her fingers. It instantly sprang back into shape at her touch, and she patted with blind fingertips to make sure the braided lights were in place. Not quite looking at Kemperer she said, "You can switch off the music now."

He had quite forgotten the sinuous song of the stones. He pressed the switch that killed the speakers, pressed another to vent the gas from the balloons. As he collected them, Juana said, "This is really the nicest thing that's happened to me on this miserable world. Really."

Kemperer began to stow the limp balloons away.

"You disapprove of me, don't you? Now you will say to your cronies that you've had Amarez's whore."

"I don't have any cronies, Seyoura." Clean and cold: this was the best way. But his heart was torn by the forlorn look on her face. "It's just that your friend . . ."

"He brought me along as decoration more than anything else. I'm a status symbol to him. He was a poor kid from the north side of Rio and now he can afford to bring someone like me all the way from Earth. In that way I'm like Igor, he shows me off, takes me to receptions, dinners, and I look good on his arm. Really, that's all there is to it. He's a lousy lay."

"You don't have to explain, Seyoura."

Her mood switched; she looked contrite. "It always makes me want to talk. And I haven't been able to talk to anyone like this for so long. . . . I'm sorry. All I was trying to do was to say, thank you."

Kemperer smiled. "You don't have to thank someone who wanted the same thing."

So it ended on a note of politeness. They walked back to the jumpjet like strangers brought together by some mutually embarrassing accident, not touching and hardly speaking except to exchange commonplaces about the landscape. The act of love was behind them, abandoned in the fragile grotto

which would not outlast the winter storms. Wiped clean: back at the city airport Juana made a show of handing Kemperer his fee and walked away without looking back, the bodyguard following on careful catseet.

It was probably the last time Kemperer would leave the city that side of winter. He was checking the jumpjet's systems in the dim echoing hangar when Donovan found him.

The Guildmaster watched, her small mouth twisted awry, as Kemperer fitted the cover back on the aircoop, then asked, "So how did it go?"

The screwdriver buzzed in Kemperer's hand. "I didn't ask her about Amarez, if that's what you mean."

"Christ, Kemperer! If everyone was like you there'd be no Guild. Don't you care what happens?"

"But what did you want me to do? Put thumbscrews on her with the bodyguard standing around?"

"I suppose not." Donovan sighed heavily. "How's your machine?"

"Oh, I'm just checking it over."

Donovan said, "It's going really badly, Kemperer. Things are getting beyond me. Amarez flew off somewhere today and he's seeing the city fathers tonight, but I haven't been able to find out what's going on. My usual sources have dried up."

Stooped under the belly of his craft, Kemperer looked around. Donovan shrugged, her leather jacket creaking. A big, tired woman, the skin in the hollows of her eyesockets looking bruised in the dim light of the hangar. "It's just that he's running rings around me. Gets to me. Sorry if I've been pushing, Kemperer."

"What are you going to do?"

"Try and get an angle. I hear the government might be trying something. Unless they get to him there'll be some killing this winter." She sighed again. "Well, see you around."

"Sure. I'm sorry, Anne."

"Forget it," Donovan said, and walked off through the shadow and halflight between parked jumpjets towards the hangar's gaping door. Kemperer watched her go; no stranger to solitude, now he felt more alone than ever before.

The next week passed slowly.

Every day Kemperer sat in the Solar Café, watching the hologram of Earth's turning globe and like the rest of the guides waiting in vain for clients that surely would not now come. The last liner was due to depart in only three days.

Kemperer's mingled fear and guilt diminished in those quiet days. Nothing had been done to him; and he could do nothing. What would Juana have told him? And what difference would it have made anyway? His wife had said that he was too much of a loner, one of her many accusations towards

the end, when she had been storing up grievances to justify her desertion, but perhaps this one was true. Kemperer took little part in the banter of the other guides and went home earlier than most.

It was all over, he thought, but he still nursed a faint fantasy of Juana coming to him, asking to be taken away from Amarez. A stupid romantic dream, to be sure, but enjoyable. She had reached out and touched him, among the stones, touched him more deeply than he cared to admit.

When she finally came to him then, in the roof-garden of the hotel, Kemperer was not surprised. It seemed inevitable.

It was evening, and Kemperer had been on his way home. Above, the slanting panes of the city's dome were a deep turquoise, a colour that Juana's dress almost exactly matched. She said mischievously, "I couldn't see you in the café with all your cronies watching. I thought you'd never leave."

They had met between the café and the elevators, on a gravel path that wound through contrived banks of lichen. Now Juana turned and Kemperer followed her deeper into the roof-garden. He said, "Where's your bodyguard?"

"Out," she said briefly. There was a slope of coarse grass and she ran down it, her flimsy many-layered dress shifting to allow Kemperer glimpses of a smooth knee, the hollow of her back, the side of one of her small breasts. He followed, his mouth suddenly dry, and she turned to face him beside an immense flowering bush.

"I was fed up with having to sit around the suite when Julio was out on business, so he let me go out with one of the men he's hired here. I got rid of him by saying that he was always eyeing me. Now I can go out by myself as long as I stay in the hotel. Don't worry, I don't think anyone's watching me."

"I was just surprised, that's all."

Juana plucked an overblown flower from the bush and tucked it behind her ear. "I was looking for you because I'm tired of the hotel. I seem to spend half my life in them. Can you take me somewhere?"

"Wherever you want."

"You're sweet. But it can't be like last time. Julio would be suspicious. He knows that I'm not that much of a tourist. Do you know the old city on the other side of the Crystal Sea?"

"Of course. But it's off-limits."

"Julio went there: it sounded fascinating." She smiled. "Can't you?"

"It's expensive. There are bribes to pay." The city had been the resort of the old rulers of Ruby, now supposedly protected by the Marginal Culture Council because a small tribe of autochthons lived in its ruins.

"Julio is used to paying bribes," Juana said. "We'll go tomorrow. I know he's meeting people here, so he won't need Igor. But don't worry, because I think I know a way around Igor. Now, you mustn't get too close to me or if

we are being watched there will be trouble. I'll see you in the morning." She blew him a kiss and was gone.

Late the next morning they flew north towards the blood-red rising sun — the season was that far advanced. For a while Kemperer and Juana exchanged commonplaces about the glittering landscape below, but this soon spun out. Kemperer was acutely aware of the recriminatory bulk of the bodyguard in back, and wondered how Juana planned to neutralise him, and when she would do it. And that led him to think about Julio Amarez. Perhaps Juana was thinking along the same lines, but he could hardly ask her, and so they flew on in thickening silence until at last the horizon grew a dark rim.

Kemperer pointed. "That's the Ilyrian Sink. The ruins are just at its edge."

Juana leaned forward. "They watched the sunrise instead of the sunset. I wonder if that's a reflection on us or them."

"Ruby was originally colonised on the other side of the Sink, so this part of the Sea was the first to be reached."

Juana laughed. "You have a prosaic mind, Seymour Kemperer."

An escarpment pushed into the Crystal Sea like the prow of a liner, fronted by the great curving complex where the aristocrats had lived, its ornately decorated substructure dividing upwards into dozens of spire-capped towers; it looked as if it had grown rather than been built. Kemperer swung the jumpjet high above this conglomeration and descended across gridded ruins of pleasure palaces, gambling houses and restaurants towards the overgrown airfield.

On one side the ruins reared against the pearly sky like a grounded iceberg; on the other huddled a shanty village of long low huts built of plastic sheeting stripped from the ruins. Kemperer had scarcely cut the jets when some of the villagers began to make their way towards the jumpjet, trailed by excited children and several large hunting dogs.

A constant icy wind blew, tugging at the villagers' brightly coloured robes and blowing Juana's black hair to one side. The children had stopped some distance away, giggling amongst themselves and pointing at the stolid bodyguard while the adults slowly advanced.

"Mister Kemperer," the woman at their head said. She was tall and slightly stooped, her robes pushed back from wiry, tattooed arms. "We had not thought to see you again this year."

"One last time, Mistress Armiger," Kemperer said, and handed over the bottle of gin which always lubricated his visits here, the least of the necessary bribes.

Armiger took it without comment and passed it to the man beside her.

"There's food too, when we return."

"That's good. The others brought nothing, and didn't ask us either."

"Others?" Then Kemperer remembered that Amarez had visited the ruins.

"Not guides like you, and strangers to me. They came in a big red flying machine, walked about the city for a long time. Two of my young hunters followed them."

"What did these strangers do?"

"Walked about, as I said. The hunters couldn't understand their talk, but there was much of it." Armiger shrugged. "You know what it means, Seymour Kemperer?"

"Not really."

"But something, perhaps?" Armiger asked with a keen look.

"I really don't know. If you like, I'll tell the M.C.C."

"We will see them in the spring," Armiger said, and smiled a cheerful, gap-toothed smile at Juana, at the unresponsive bodyguard. "Enjoy your visit, S'your, S'youra." She executed a half-bow and turned away, leading her party back to the village.

The conglomerate building at the front of the resort had been designed as a windbreak, just as the dome protected the modern capital on the other side of the Sea. Most of the buildings in its lee were still intact, their plastic facades weathered to a dismal grey and shrouded by laurel bushes. Grass, close-cropped, grew over the broad avenues.

As they walked through the ruins, Juana asked Kemperer, "Was that American you were speaking back there?"

"That's all we spoke on Ruby, before Earth found us again."

"What were you talking about?"

"About what your friend might have been doing," Kemperer said, watching her.

"Oh, he never tells *me*," Juana said disingenuously. "I didn't even know that people lived here."

"Not in the city. The villagers just graze their goats here." Kemperer felt a touch of embarrassment, as he always did when explaining about the villagers, a touch of shame that people would sink so low in so short a time, from sailing between the stars to grubbing a poor living from stoney fields and hunting who knew what out in the Sink.

"They came from the city, though?"

"That's what they say, but actually their ancestors were refugees from a war on the other side of the Sink. After the revolution everyone left the city, you see. The rulers were killed or had fled, and their servants went back to their homes."

"And what were your people doing before we came, Kemperer?"

"Fighting a small war with our neighbours. Oh, we had cities, writing, a sort of science — although that was mostly trying to decipher the machinery our ancestors had abandoned. And taxation, armies . . . we were quite civilized. My father was a soldier, and I suppose I would have been one too. But

Earth saved me from that."

There was a space of silence in which memory of his wife bloomed and died.

"You remember the first ship from Earth?"

"That was what, thirty years ago? I was only a baby."

"I don't understand your talk of aristocrats. I always thought that the United States of America was what they called a democracy."

"I wouldn't know about that. How it was here, the first colonists had already built a society when a second wave of colonisation began —"

"I remember! The ramscoops! Oh, I was always bad at history, but I remember the frozen people on the ships that ate stardust."

Kemperer laughed. "Anyway, instead of helping the newcomers the first colonists made them slaves. That lasted until Earth stopped sending ships because of the war. There was a revolution, and the resort was broken up by its cooks and whores, croupiers and waiters."

She studied him. "You don't like talking about history, do you?"

"Well, the revolution destroyed too much. When Earth came back it was with faster-than-light ships, and all we had were steamships and balloons. But at least we weren't all like the villagers here."

"I thought they were charming, with that woman leading them."

By now they had reached the great curving building which had housed the families of the aristocracy, each to its own tower — half of those in ruins now, broken fingers stabbing towards the cloudy sky. At the service entrance the bodyguard stepped forward and peered into the shadows, then hand-signaled to Juana.

"Igor wants to know if it's safe."

"Surely. I even have a light." Kemperer showed the glotube to the bodyguard, who nodded.

"Well, it doesn't look safe to me," Juana said, and took Kemperer's arm as they stepped through the broken doors.

Nothing was left in the loading bays but dust and potsherds and goatshit, and the service corridor down which Kemperer led Juana and the bodyguard was even emptier. The harsh light of the glotube splashed over flaking concrete walls and closed doors; once something skittered away and Juana let out a breathy squeak and huddled closer to Kemperer. Her musk, the warmth of her slim body down his side.

At the end of the corridor a door gaped onto a huge, high, dusty room. Swords of sunlight pierced deep slits in the ceiling to strike crumbling tapestries, a stained marble floor. Ornate tables and chairs, their gilt long since peeled away, stood still in dumb, touching obedience. Things outlast us all. A heavy door gave under Kemperer's shoulder and he ushered Juana onto the balcony.

She crossed to the weathered balustrade and leaned out, and the bodyguard moved swiftly and solicitously to her side. "It's all right," she said

sharply. "Let me look, Igor."

A thin cold wind blew her hair back, prelude of the winter-long storms caused by the tipping of the poles towards the plane of orbit. Behind the wind was a gigantic glare, the world on fire all the way out to the horizon: an unfocused luminosity qualified here and there by intense points of light where random facets reflected sunlight towards the city.

"It's not so different," Juana said after a while, "and I'm cold. Let's go back."

"To the capital?"

"Just out of here," she said, and pushed past Kemperer. The bodyguard followed docilely; as Kemperer pulled the heavy door shut Juana cried out, "Freeze, Igor!"

The bodyguard halted in midstep, then assumed a slumped waiting attitude. "I said I'd arrange something," Juana told Kemperer, and held out a small box a little like the control unit Kemperer wore on his belt. "This overrides Igor's programmes. Sometimes his systems have to be serviced, and Julio uses this to stop Igor attacking the biomech." She ordered the bodyguard to walk across to a chair, made him sit down. "Sleep," she said, and the bodyguard's heavy head drooped towards his chest.

Kemperer watched from the other side of the room, separated from Juana by the angled blades of sunlight. Some feeling too faint to be called guilt stopped him from going to her, and he stood as still as Igor as she walked back, her hair flashing each time she stepped through the sunlight.

"It's quite safe," she told him. "Now take me somewhere, somewhere nice."

"They knew how to live, those aristocrats of yours." Naked, Juana prowled the bedroom, tugging at stiff drawers in the elaborate armoire, blowing dust from the servitor's stained panel, studying the stage of the old-fashioned holovision. Kemperer had set the glotube in one corner, and its light was mellowed by the walls and ceiling of the plush room. He lay, also naked, on the overstuffed, dusty, canopied bed, watching his lover and thinking about Amarez.

Juana posed in front of a full-length mirror, slim legs astride as she brushed at her black hair. "They should have rebuilt this place. People from Earth would love it."

Kemperer wondered if she was trying to tell him something, trying to hint at what Amarez was planning. And if it was a hint, surely she was suggesting indirectly that he could use the information as he liked. Cautiously, he said, "It's a long way from the centre of things, and it has bad associations besides."

"Oh, history." She turned and made a face, "History is just something that happened to dead people. Besides, it's your history: people from Earth wouldn't care about it."

"Come back to bed." Kemperer was uneasy now.

She laughed. "You're sweet."

"Sure. But we have to go back soon."

As she hugged him, she said softly, "You know this may not be possible again. Not for a while anyway."

"He watches you that closely?"

"He's like a spider in the middle of a web. He likes to know about everything around him."

"Why do you put up with it?"

She shrugged in the loose cradle of his arms. "Julio can be sweet sometimes, and it's better than being owned, being married. But I'm leaving him when we get back to Earth. Sometimes he can be cruel, and the whole thing is becoming too serious. He asked me to marry him just before we came to the capital: he was drunk at the time and I think he forgot himself, but I think he meant it too. I don't want to marry *anyone*. So when we get back to Earth I have to find a way of ending it without upsetting his honour."

"I don't understand the way he has you. As if you're property."

"Things are different where I come from, Kemperer. That woman who came to meet us here, the leader of her people?"

"Yes."

"There are few women in Greater Brazil with power. You are ashamed because your world lost a few machines. On Earth, in my country, half the people were lost a few hundred years ago. After the big war there were lots of little ones, and in one an enemy introduced a short-lived plague into Greater Brazil that killed most of the women . . . after that women became protected in my country, became property. History, you see. Julio is my way of getting some power, the only way I have."

Kemperer saw something in her face then, a brittle hardness back of her eyes. He said, "I don't feel like that about you. I'd like to help."

"And have me for yourself? I try not to be anyone's for too long, Kemperer." Her smile was a centimetre from his face: then she kissed him and said, "Now you have to tell me something about your life. Tell me about your wife."

"How did you know about her?"

"I peeked when Julio had you checked out."

"Oh. Well, she's on Earth now, that's the most important thing. She was one of the supervisors when they were building the capital, and I was working there too." He remembered her coarse black hair, her black eyes and broad cheekbones: one half Inuit. They had lived together for three of Ruby's short years and then her work had been done and she had wanted to go. And he had stayed: out of fear of the great change emigrating to Earth would have entailed, and out of an odd sense that there was something for him on Ruby, perhaps no more than a vestige of loyalty to his family but enough to stay him. On his wife's insistence the break had been clean. He

had kept a few mementoes for half a year and then one day thrown them out and walked the scintillating edge of the city until nightfall. That was when he had decided to become a guide.

"Hey," Juana said, leaning over him. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"It's just . . ." But he could not tell her what he felt; he hardly knew himself.

"Forget history," she said. "Think of now." And lowered her smiling mouth to his.

After he had parked the jumpjet in the hangar, long after Juana had left, Kemperer sat in its dark cabin in a kind of moral funk. More than ever he felt that he should tell Donovan about Amarez; but to do so would be a betrayal not only of Juana but of his cultivated aloofness.

Yet it was not as if he was certain to see Juana again, and in the end that was what his decision turned upon. Before she had reactivated the body-guard Juana had promised to try to arrange something, but her look, glittering as if backed by steel, was not reassuring. And in the airport they had been able to make only the most cursory farewell in the watchful presence of Igor.

Now Kemperer felt a mingled regret and relief. It had been nice, but surely there could be nothing more. There was the shadowy menace of Amarez . . . and besides, they really were from two different worlds. So he would find Donovan and tell her that Amarez had visited the ruined resort, tell her about Juana's veiled hints concerning his plans for it. It was the end of something, he thought, as he left the jumpjet amongst all the other machines in the dim hangar.

As it turned out, he was both right and wrong.

Most of the chairs had been set upside down on the tables in the Solar Café. A robot was polishing the floor a centimetre at a time, like an eternally patient steel tortoise. Half the lights were out and the Earth had been turned off too. Without it the café looked bare and bleak. Donovan was not there, but half a dozen guides huddled at the end of the bar and Kemperer strolled towards them, for once wanting their mundane banter.

"Jesus, Kemperer," one of them said. "You heard?"

"About what?"

"About Donovan. Her machine went down."

Someone else, a slouching unshaven man called Quiling, tossed off his drink and said, "Went down Hell. It blew up in midair, not twenty klicks from here. Wreckage all over the Argus Syncline, you can forget about finding sites there for a few years."

"She was a good Guild Master," the first guide said. "What do you say, Kemperer?"

"I'll miss her." There was a space inside Kemperer, a hole waiting to be filled: with grief, or anger, or fear. For he knew what Donovan had sought to find out.

"I forgot," the guide said. "You're involved with Amarez, right?"

"I took his woman out, but since when have clients meant anything?"

"Don't pay him any mind, Kemperer," Quiling said. "We're all upset here. Come on and have a drink; we're drinking for Anne."

The first guide said, "You just want to be careful with the company you keep, that's all, Kemperer. It might not look so good."

"I'll do my best," Kemperer said, and as he leant against the bar saw Igor the bodyguard coming towards him, trailed by a balding man who smiled tightly and said, "Seyour Kemperer?"

Kemperer could not deny it. He heard the other guides shift uneasily and felt a high tingling, a stupid urge to simply walk away. But there was nowhere to go, not in the city.

"Seyour Amarez wants a word. Let's go."

Meek as a lamb, Kemperer went.

He was made to wait a long time in the opulent antechamber of Amarez's suite, high ceilings, gold and ivory furniture scattered over a seeming hectare of carpet, huge windows overlooking the plaza and the blue panes of the dome. The hide of the couch on which he sat pricked Kemperer's thighs; sweat pricked his palms. The balding man eyed him from an identical couch, one arm stretched on the back so that his jacket fell open to reveal a holstered pistol. He had told Kemperer not to worry, but Kemperer knew that there was only one reason why Amarez would want to see him.

At last the doors on the far side of the room swung open. The silent bodyguard padded through, followed by a tall, thin man dressed in a tailored version of the uniform of the RUN reconstruction corps, the uniform Kemperer's wife had left behind.

"Well," the man, Amarez, said, and smiled widely, revealing small spaced teeth. Kemperer could not quite meet his gaze. It was an absurd parody of the cheated husband confronting his cuckolder, absurd except it could well cost Kemperer his life.

"This is how it is," Amarez said. "You've caused me some embarrassment, Seyour Kemperer. And I don't like it. Don't like it at all, understand? It doesn't help what I'm trying to do here. You know what I'm trying to do?"

Kemperer said nothing, waiting. A bolt, a blow.

But Amarez wanted to explain, speaking in staccato bursts and chopping the air with his hands. "I came here to help. There's no imagination here and too many restrictions. I'm going to change that. I see a lot of potential going to waste and too much interference by politicians. Politicians can't organise pleasure, I should know, a lot of my friends are politicians. They

want pleasure, they come to me. So I'm willing to sacrifice some of my time to get things going here. But that's all to be wasted if my credibility is undermined. And my time's expensive. You know what I mean?"

Kemperer nodded, but Amarez made an abrupt gesture of dismissal, as if it didn't matter whether or not Kemperer agreed. He was wired up, on some drug or pure nervous energy. His dark skin gleamed in the bright light. His smile was a lizard flash. "I have to straighten this thing out, get back my respect. You understand?"

Amarez stepped forward, and Kemperer started. But the bodyguard casually pinned him as Amarez leaned down. He raised a slim hand, and Kemperer flinched.

Afterwards the bodyguard and the balding man helped Kemperer up and led him to a small darkened room and dropped him on the carpet there, careless of the blood dripping from Kemperer's broken nose. The balding man said, "Now you get something to make you sleep. Stay still," and something stabbed Kemperer's neck and then it was daylight and he was huddled on the seat of a groundcar with the balding man bent over him again. Kemperer felt a sharp nausea and then he was retching painfully, although there was nothing to come up save gas and a little acid curd.

When the spasm had passed, the balding man helped Kemperer to his feet. "Just cooperate and it'll be fine. Feel rough? Well, Seymour Amarez is good at working people over." In this fashion Kemperer was bundled into a big, scarlet jumpjet and strapped to a seat in the rear compartment, the balding man and the bodyguard vanishing up front.

The flight was long. Kemperer retreated inside himself, away from the dull ache of his broken nose and blackened eyes, the little pains scattered all over his body. He had reached that stage of exhausted hope where each second passes of itself and all thought is suspended. When the jumpjet began to descend he hardly noticed.

It landed in a valley where brilliant crystal spires jutted from humps of sandstone the colour of dried blood. Kemperer screwed his bruised eyes against their glare as he was led from the jumpjet.

The first thing he saw was his own machine, and then Amarez beside it and two men, strangers in narrowly cut formal suits, beside him. One wore sunglasses whose lenses flashed and flashed, a nervous undecipherable code.

Amarez pressed his hands together almost eagerly and said, "All right," and the bodyguard left Kemperer's side and threw up the hatch of his jumpjet, reached in and dragged Juana out. She stumbled and recovered, glaring at Amarez, at the two impassive strangers, through her disordered hair.

Kemperer lunged forward then, but the balding man casually pulled him back. Smiling, Amarez caught Juana's arm and brought her across. Her face was white and gaunt hollows had appeared beneath her cheekbones.

Kemperer said, "She doesn't have anything to do with this."

"Both of you do, right? I didn't only watch her through my bodyguard here. I know it all."

"He put a recorder in my jewelry," Juana said, her voice dull. She was looking off at the fragmented glitter of the crystal spires.

"Shut up," Amarez said casually, as Kemperer asked, "You're all right?"

Amarez turned and said to the two watchers, "Notice his concern. You see how appropriate this is. You be quiet too," he said, turning to Kemperer, and brought a hand down across Kemperer's cheek, tearing it open with one of his rings.

Kemperer slapped a hand to the sudden pain and the bodyguard, interpreting this as a threat to his owner, lunged across and knocked Kemperer to the ground. Blackness shot through Kemperer's head as it banged on stone, then through a blur of tears he saw Juana backing away, something, the bodyguard's pistol, in her hand, and the balding man reaching inside his jacket. Light lanced — Kemperer felt a wash of heat on his face — and the balding man choked and crumpled.

"Call off Igor," Juana said, her voice vibrating like a plucked wire. The muzzle of the pistol weaved in her unsteady grip.

"Of course," Amarez said, and half-raised his hands. He seemed almost amused, as if this were an unexpected but entertaining charade he had stumbled into. Beside him, the bodyguard turned his head from side to side as if dazzled by the pistol's discharge, like the time . . . but Kemperer, on the ground, was watching Juana, etched sharply against the glare of the crystals all around.

"No harm was meant for you," Amarez told her. "Only to your friend here. Be sensible, Juana. I'll look out for you, yes?"

"I just want my own life," she said, stepping back. Then, "You're always telling me what to do," and flame flared in her black hair and she collapsed.

For a bright instant Kemperer didn't realise what had happened. Then Amarez let out an inarticulate cry and turned on the pair of strangers. "She wasn't supposed to . . . only him!"

The man with the sunglasses tucked away his pistol and said coldly, "I hope you are better at building than at revenge, Mister Amarez. Finish this."

Amarez shuddered, began to say something, then swung on the bodyguard and ordered him to carry Juana's body to the scarlet jumpjet. Kemperer watched the bodyguard narrowly; a wave of coldness had swept aside his dull exhaustion and he was engaged with the world again, although it was as if he were watching from a great distance. Everything seemed precisely detailed and absolutely unreal. He watched the bodyguard as he lifted Juana into the jumpjet's cabin, then obediently followed him towards his own machine. Twice the bodyguard flicked at the air before his face, the gesture that had been the symptom of the interference with his circuits in the

grotto where Kemperer had lain with Juana, amongst the music of the stones. Music which must hang unheard between the crystal spires . . .

It was with numb, fragile hope that Kemperer, seated in the pilot's chair of his jumpjet, leaned forward slightly as the bodyguard lashed his arms to the chair-back.

In the glare outside, Amarez smiled tightly, the smile of a skull, as the bodyguard clumsily backed away. "Any last words?" His lips were white. "No? The battery of your poor vehicle has had its dampers removed, Seymour Kemperer. Understand? Soon it will overheat and then . . . like your friend Donovan. They'll hear the explosion in those ruins you took poor Juana to." He nodded, then sharply ordered the bodyguard to the scarlet jumpjet. A minute later it lifted in a cloud of dust, and Kemperer began to writhe in his seat.

The bodyguard, dazzled by the music of the stones, had left Kemperer's bonds fractionally loose, and as Kemperer wriggled he felt them loosen further. Then, sweat stinging the wound on his face, he was free. He tumbled dizzily from the cabin, sprawling on hard cold stone. A body lay twenty metres off, Juana's body it seemed in that instant, but then the dizziness was gone. Not Juana, but the balding man. Amarez had taken Juana away.

Then Kemperer was stumbling up the long slope, clutching at crystal and rock, seeing nothing but a blurred circle in which he placed his feet one after the other, a wavering whine behind him. No matter how hard he concentrated, he kept stumbling, cutting his hands as he pulled himself up to start over. He had scarcely reached the top of the slope when the jumpjet blew behind him, the blast knocking him head over heels among the stones where, the day almost ended, the hunters found him curled up like an abandoned baby.

The whole story tumbled out of Kemperer in an often repetitive, sometimes incoherent stream of words that the headswoman, Mark in the shadows behind her, listened to gravely, failing to understand much but grasping the essential points, Amarez's plans for the city above, Kemperer's infatuation with Juana, the tragedy of her death.

When Kemperer had finished, as he sipped rockrose tea to soothe his strained throat, the headswoman asked him, "Will you fight this man, Amarez? Before the winds, but after we found you in the Sea, he came again to the city above." Kemperer almost spilled tea all over himself.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, from your description and the scarlet flying machine. He has plans for the city, you say. We saw him, this second time, with men from the capital who are supposed to look after our interests. You understand that we look after our own as much as we are able, but we are still small in number and always we face those more ruthless than ourselves. Your fight may be bound up in ours."

"I don't know if I want to fight him. I mean, I don't have anything to fight him with. I never did." Kemperer was thinking of the dark-clad pair of men, one of whom had actually shot Juana. For all his blustering boasts, Amarez was really just a part of something bigger: as soon try and stop the winter storms as fight that. Yet if Amarez knew that Kemperer had survived . . .

The headswoman told Kemperer, "The medical service will visit soon. You could leave with that unless it is too dangerous for you."

"Thank you. Already I owe you a lot, my life I suppose."

The headswoman dismissed this with a shrug. "Mark will help you in the meantime." She turned and told the young man, "Teach him how to hunt, Mark, and how to read the land." To Kemperer: "There is no need to thank me, we are outcasts ourselves. We understand."

As dust settled from the sky, the villagers left their caves to haul plastic sheeting from storage slots and fit it together to form their crude huts. The village's central firepit was scraped clean: a fire was lit. In the lee of the escarpment narrow fields straggled down the terraced sides of the many ravines there, their precious soil protected by ramifying stone walls, and for a few days Kemperer helped to turn a leavening of goatshit into the earth in preparation for the first planting. But Mark was impatient with this work, the province of the old and the children, and insisted that Kemperer come with him to hunt.

"I limp. And I've never fired a rifle or thrown a spear in my life."

"Neither had I, once. And Mistress Armiger says you should learn. Perhaps you will ambush that S'yr Amarez."

"Well, I doubt that."

It was raining that day, as it had been on and off since the villagers quit the caves. The crumpled lands of the Ilyrian Sink were dusted with green, and some plants had precipitately flowered before even their first leaves had unfolded. Kemperer sat on a rock in the rain amidst frail white flowers nodding on long stems and watched as Mark stalked a browsing antelope, moving a few steps at a time and freezing, moving again. But the capricious breeze changed and the antelope caught the young man's scent and bolted, its white scut flashing. Mark walked back with his spear on his shoulder. He wore only a scrap of fabric about his loins and his thin adolescent body glistened palely in the rain.

"If you think it's hard now," he said cheerfully, "you should see how they are after they've dropped their foals. But this year I will pass my rite of manhood and I will be able to ride after them."

"Now one thing I don't intend to do is ride a horse."

"It looks like fun." All the while Mark had been casting about, searching the ground. Now he pointed.

Kemperer saw nothing but a few undistinguished stones. "What is it?"

"A scuttler." Mark stepped forward, his spear raised to his shoulder, then

stabbed down: Kemperer saw the small dun-shelled creature just as the spear-blade pinned it.

As Mark stripped out the scuttler's guts, Kemperer said, "I don't think I'll ever understand this place."

Mark wiped his forehead, leaving a streak of blood. "You'll see," he said. "I'll show you it all."

All that week they ranged the Sink. Mark even took Kemperer a little way into the Crystal Sea one day to show him how to find food and water there: a thorny plant whose white pith was edible; transparent lizards which were good to eat despite their poisonous bite; conies which burrowed into the sandstone underlying the crystal. Mark showed Kemperer how to peg nets at the entrances of their burrows, then took him to where a high canyon spilled a thin rill of water across tilted crystal slabs.

"Dig between the crystals when this is dry and you'll find water."

Kemperer nodded. It might all be useful, or none of it. It didn't seem to matter. He was adrift, out of touch with the real, the true. That had all ended with Juana's death: nothing realer.

He and Mark returned to the staked-out coney burrows and found three long-footed sleek-pelted creatures kicking in the nets. Mark killed them by twisting their necks, cleaned them out, and passed the hind legs of each through a slit in the neck so that they could be hung on a stick.

The pair walked back in silence through the glistening fragmented rainbows that lived there, among the stones. Ahead, the escarpment reared dark against the sky (it was another grey day), the fretted outline of the ruins like a crown upon it. They crossed a downsloping shelf of sandstone, thick with the runners of thorny plants — it must have been a channel for runoff from the spring rains.

And suddenly everything Kemperer had been told locked inside himself, like crystals running through a supersaturated solution. He saw and dissolved in his seeing, and as the moment passed he knew that he would never see the Crystal Sea as merely a chaotic desert again. It was alive, ordered, and full of change, as explicit, and as explicable, as a text.

Mark called, "Come on. It's a ways to walk yet."

Kemperer waved and hurried to catch up, and together they walked on towards the ruins and the village beyond.

The rains petered out, became no more than a few scattered showers cast like handfuls of precious silver across the land, ceased. The hunters had caught and broken horses by then (an annual task, as horses could not be stabled in the caves in winter) and ranged wide across the Sink. Soon the brief spring would have passed and the larger game would move on. It was time for Mark's ordeal, his passing into manhood.

Kemperer watched with the other villagers as the four youths, each naked but for a loincloth, each carrying a spear, set out from the tumbled blocks of

stone at the foot of the escarpment. One turned back after only a few steps and was received into the crowd, her head down: she had chosen to become a goatherder, to forego the responsibilities and rewards of becoming a hunter. Kemperer watched Mark jog steadily out, watched a long time until the boy was lost in the early morning glare.

The ordeal of survival in the Sink lasted ten days, a phase of Ruby's small close moon, and Kemperer felt that he should serve a penance during that time, perhaps an equivalent to the hardships Mark would be undergoing. For a while he worked in the little fields alongside the old women and men, thinking, as he carried precious water to the rows of young barley, of Juana and Amarez and Igor the bodyguard. His time in the Sink and the Sea with Mark had flensed away everything extraneous, and these figures stood out clear and bright in his mind, their relationships as simple as those of a stage tragedy. Only his part was unclear. He hacked at hard soil, the sun burning his bare scarred back, and wondered what he should do, where he should go. Already the medical mission had been and gone, and at Kemperer's request the headswoman had not told the technician about him. Yet Kemperer was sure that he was only marking time with the villagers; now that he understood it he felt sure that their way of life was not his, although sometimes he regretted that it could not be otherwise. He had been living someone else's life in the capital, a life his wife had brought out from Earth and abandoned there, and now he had lost that. Like Mark, Kemperer was searching out the new beginning of his life, but in a desert of emotion.

Then, just before Mark was due to return from his ordeal, everything changed.

Kemperer, bored with agriculture, had gone out into the Crystal Sea, on impulse taking his old gear as well as traps for conies. It was a hot day. Polished facets glared brilliantly, their light rippling in the heat. Kemperer pushed down the top of his loose robes, tied his old belt around his waist. He passed several likely-looking spots for coney, but the traps were only an excuse. He was seeking something else, turning this way and that through the maze of crystal until at last he came upon a cluster of hexagonal columns, burning with internal fire beneath a smoothed sandstone ridge.

He wasn't sure about the balloons, but they inflated well enough, rising one by one into the gelid air, and he sat in the shade of a boulder and pressed the switch which activated their speakers. The music, that old seductive siren song, began, and Kemperer sat for an hour or more immersed in it, all thought suspended.

And then the jumpjets passed overhead.

There were two, low and fast, their jets ripping through the song of the stones. One a large freighter, the other sleekly scarlet: Amarez's machine.

Kemperer stood again and watched as they dwindled in the direction of the escarpment, then sat down again, his heart beating lightly, quickly. He had known this was coming, but he had put the knowledge away from him-

self. To be sure, the villagers were supposed to be protected, but Kemperer knew that such legal niceties were no obstacle to people like Amarez. They took what they wanted. And then, because the music was still playing, he remembered how Juana had danced lightly, softly, in the lost grotto, how they had made love on the cold hard ground with the pulse of the earth singing above them. And he remembered the sudden shock, a dagger of ice, when flame had blown out her head. Gone, gone as surely as the grotto had been blown away by that winter's wind. He thought of Amarez as part of an elemental force, cruel and unstoppable as a storm: men could only shelter from that force. Yet he was also human, and therefore vulnerable.

Kemperer pressed his hands to his face and the sudden movement startled a transparent lizard which had been hanging by sticky tab-toes to a facet of crystal above its head. It darted into a crevice and lay still, its pulse beating visibly in its throat, beating to the rhythm of the stones' song.

Kemperer waited out in the Sea until the jumpjets departed. By then it was evening, and the sun had set by the time he had returned to the village. Half of the huts were gone, and the rest were being dismantled. Men and women were carrying their panels to their storage slots; others with bundles balanced on their heads were straggling along the path that led to the caves, children running back and forth amongst them. A herd of goats raised dust as they were driven along.

Kemperer found the headswoman beside the extinguished firepit, packing her belongings. "I always thought we were to be left alone because we have nothing to offer," she said. "The city is a ruin of the past after all. But I suppose that your Amarez, being from Earth, will not be worried by the past. It is not his. I had one of the hunters watch what they did, and they were looking at the bigfront building."

That was what the villagers called the conglomerate hotel. Kemperer nodded.

"One kind of wind or another," the headswoman said, "and we shelter in the caves. But there will be trouble for us before long. I can feel it."

"Amarez will have his own resort, to run as he wants. He said something, before he tried to have me killed, about politics and pleasure not mixing. He meant that the capital didn't suit his plans."

"And you, Mister Kemperer? What will you do?"

"That's what I came to tell you."

The next day the fledgling hunters began to struggle back, each with some trophy of their ordeal. Mark was the last to arrive, bearing the flensed hide of a Flame Dragon, a man-sized predatory reptile that stalked the saltflats in the dead centre of the Ilyrian Sink. He brought this to Kemperer that evening, after he had rested and eaten, and said seriously, "I want you to have it. To remember me when you are gone."

"What makes you think I'm going?"

Mark squatted on the end of Kemperer's pallet, lean and darkly tanned; there was a long, half-healed scar on his left arm. He said, "Your enemy has pursued you here. You will kill him and go, yes? After all, you'd make a lousy hunter, and a hero should not herd goats."

"I wondered if you knew about the flying machine. But I'm not planning to kill Amarez."

Mark shrugged and asked tangentially, "Did this Amarez really come all the way from Earth to make trouble here?"

"Not to make trouble specifically, but to make money," Kemperer said, and then had to explain about money. Mark had trouble understanding why one man would want more things than he could use. "That's how it is," Kemperer told him. "You're lucky out here."

"For only a little while longer, it seems." Mark ran his thumb over the heavy shingled folds of the hide and added, "Some of the hunters say they would help you."

"Why haven't they come to me?" When Mark didn't answer, Kemperer asked, "You'd like to do something? You know what I told Mistress Armiger?"

"You want to kill this Amarez because of what happened to your woman, and because he crippled you. I want to kill him because of what he will do to my home, to my people." When Kemperer said nothing, Mark added weakly, "That's how I see it anyhow. We might have a poor life of it here, but it's our own. Our ancestors fled across the Sink because they would not fight as other people fought in the old days, because they thought everyone should have the same chances in life, no one person greater than another. . . . I was told all this when I was a kid, you see, never rightly understood it until I was in the desert, by myself. Out there you can see what you are, and why."

Kemperer looked at Mark as he sat in the soft lamplight. The young man had a new austere authority, an inner calm: he had grown up. To learn is to grow. Kemperer realised that the only reason he had hesitated in accepting Mark's offer of help was a residue of his old habit of solitude, not quite burned away by their days together in the Sink. He said, "I don't plan to kill Amarez. Once I thought I would have to, but I was crazy back then, I think. I'd like to show him what you and I know, that's all. If you'll help me do that, I'll be glad. But no killing."

"I understand," Mark said, and asked with a touch of his usual impetuosity, "What do we do?"

Two big transports began to ferry in the construction crew and materials and machines in the clear hot days that followed, and a kind of shanty town rose amongst the levelled ruins beside the airstrip, bubbletents and generators, frame shacks and glotubes strung from high poles, all the clutter Kemperer remembered from years before, when he had helped in a small way to

build the capital.

At least there was no real security to overcome. After all, what could the construction workers fear from a bunch of savages armed with muzzle-loading rifles? And the singular isolation of the ruined resort meant that there could be no outside interference short of a full-scale military operation. Kemperer, in his bright loose robes, limped throughout the ruins, only occasionally challenged by workers — and when that happened he simply went elsewhere.

Whole swathes had already been demolished; the grassy streets were churned by the tracks of construction vehicles. A column of dense smoke rose before the spires of the hotel complex, and smoke from dozens of lesser fires smeared the sky. Workers in augmented suits — twice as tall as a man and with many-jointed limbs — strode through dust and smoke and columns of reddened sunlight, devils from the most fevered imagination.

Kemperer soon abandoned the idea of an ambush in the ruins. There was nowhere to escape to afterwards and too many people about; and besides, he was no more than a savage, and not even armed. So he quit the ruins and settled down to watch the air traffic.

He watched for three days. Sometimes Mark sat beside him for an hour or so, but the young hunter was impatient. He expected Kemperer to act at once, and all Kemperer did was sit and watch, even when Amarez arrived.

The familiar scarlet jumpjet settled near the cluster of bubbletents. Kemperer, lying flat amongst dry grasses at the edge of the airstrip, saw the tall burly bodyguard, whom Juana had called Igor, hold the door of the jumpjet open, saw Amarez step down. Amarez briskly shook hands with the site foreman and was escorted away, Igor trailing alertly.

There was a rustle behind Kemperer and he started. But it was only Mark.

"I saw the red machine. I thought you might want help."

"I don't want you to do anything."

"But he's here!"

"So I saw. But remember your agreement. We do it my way. Now be quiet; I want to watch the pilot."

Mark was exasperated. "But when will you do something?"

"When I know exactly what to do. I have an idea, but I must know more."

"What is there to know but that he is here?"

"See that tent over there, away from the rest? That's where the pilots hang out. Amarez's pilot is heading that way now, and I want to see what he does."

"Are you scared?"

"Not of Amarez. Of his bodyguard, a little. Please, Mark, let me watch."

"Oh, watch all you want." Mark stood and walked away. Kemperer sighed, then settled down to his vigil again.

* * *

In the days while he waited for Amarez to return to the ruins once more, Kemperer spent most of the time modifying and then testing the relay mechanisms he had salvaged from the balloons. Occasionally he went up to the escarpment to spy on the pilots' tent, but he saw nothing that could change his plans. The trouble was that now it was fixed in his head all the weaknesses of his plan showed too clearly, holes through which his confidence could drain. Fiddling with the relays helped overcome this, but it was a relief when at last Mark came to him, all out of breath and shining with sweat, with the news that the red flying machine had arrived.

Kemperer set aside the bowl of soup from which he had been drinking and began to take off his robe. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Mark grinned: a flash of white. "I've been ready for days."

Methodically, Kemperer pulled on his patched coveralls, fastened the control unit to his belt and stowed away the relay units. He had been through this so often in his mind that now it was happening he felt nothing but a hollow coldness. He said to Mark, "I don't want you running wild."

"It's enough to help."

Mistress Armiger met them at the entrance of the caves. "It is good you go now. Some of the hunters were becoming impatient and I was afraid they would act and spoil your plan."

"I had to be sure," Kemperer said. "And thank you, for all you've done."

The headswoman made a dismissive gesture, dispelling all obligations as if they were no more binding than smoke. "Go now," she said, and as they left called after them, "Good hunting, Mister Kemperer. For all our sakes."

Kemperer and Mark walked up the path from the caves in silence. Everything seemed stunned by the heat, the earth cracked and parched in the little wheat-fields, the airstrip shimmering like silk. Kemperer limped towards the bubbletent which housed the off-duty pilots, waited as a loader hissed past on a cushion of air, then pushed inside the tent.

The pilot who had brought Amarez was lounging with a cup of coffee, alone. Kemperer had observed that the freighter pilots were often out hunting, but this was an encouraging piece of luck. When Kemperer told the pilot that something had come up with Amarez's jumpjet the man shrugged and set down his coffee.

"Christ, I have to fix as well as fly? Show me, then."

He followed Kemperer outside and Mark stepped behind him and put an arm across his throat, laid a knife on his cheek with its point at his eye. Back inside the tent the pilot stripped sullenly, grumbling about the appalling security, and submitted to being tied up with the same ill grace, saying just before Kemperer applied the gag, "You don't know what you're getting into, fellow."

"Oh, but I do," Kemperer said, and pulled the gag tight.

Kemperer changed again, from his old coveralls to the pilot's slightly too-large casual suit. "Look after that dragon skin for me," he told Mark, and

was surprised when the young hunter quickly and lightly embraced him. Then Mark hauled the pilot across his shoulders — the man glaring comically above his gag — and was gone.

Rigging the jumpjet's fission battery was surprisingly easy, but reprogramming the autopilot and fixing a relay-activated switch took much longer. Kemperer lay at an awkward angle across the pilot's seat with sunlight burning his face as he struggled to connect the actuator, certain that at any minute Amarez would return. But at last it was done and then all he had to do was wait: that was hardest of all.

The sun was slanting into its last quarter and the jumpjet was in shadow when Amarez appeared, crossing the airstrip at the head of a comet-tail of engineers and technicians, the bodyguard conspicuous amongst them. Kemperer, slouched in the pilot's seat, watched as Amarez shook hands all around before he climbed inside the passenger compartment. It was time to go.

There was no control tower. Kemperer took the jumpjet straight up and headed towards the capital until the escarpment had dropped below the glittering horizon. Then he turned it at a random angle, heading into the unmapped heart of the Crystal Sea.

He flew fast and level for an hour, nervously paying more attention to the chronometer than all the other instruments together, before he activated the first relay. A minute later the temperature indicator of the fission battery began to edge up and Kemperer popped the intercom and made his little speech.

"No landing," Amarez's voice said. "Turn right back."

"We might not make it, Seyour."

"Mary and Jesus, what a time you've picked. Wait a minute, huh?"

A moment later the connecting door slid back and the bodyguard looked in, slowly scanned the control array. Kemperer pointed to the indicator, the figure after the decimal point a blur now, and the bodyguard retreated. Amarez said over the intercom, "Well, put it down. But call another jet. I've no time to spare to look at these damn crystals."

"Of course, Seyour," said Kemperer, who hadn't the least intention of alerting anyone. He started the descent, picking a likely site in a shallow valley whose slopes were encrusted with crystal. Once down, Kemperer wiped his palms and, a high hollow singing in his ears, suggested over the intercom that Amarez might like to take cover.

"Is it that bad?"

"I might not be able to fix it, Seyour."

"Well, I know what one of these batteries can do when it blows. Okay, okay. Jesus and Mary."

Kemperer watched as Amarez and the bodyguard trudged up the slope between brilliant spires, then slipped out of the cabin and began to climb in the opposite direction. Now he had time to feel afraid. His back tingled as he

limpingly climbed, for all that the jumpjet hid him from Amarez's view, even though there were minutes to go before the battery became critical.

At last, sweating in the bath of refracted heat, Kemperer turned and pressed the second switch on his control unit. He couldn't resist watching as the autopilot took the jumpjet up and set it drifting down the length of the valley . . . and that was almost his undoing, for Amarez had turned to watch too, a small figure on the opposite slope, distorted by heat and glare. Then a spur near Kemperer burst apart, so close that as hot fragments peppered him he thought he could hear the crystal's death-song.

The bodyguard was running back down the slope and Kemperer turned, swinging his bad leg as he climbed between man-high crystals away from the valley, away from the scarlet jumpjet which now hovered just above the ridgeline, half a kilometre away. Kemperer couldn't believe that its battery hadn't blown yet.

His way was blocked by a sheer face of fractured crystal and he turned, glimpsed the bodyguard coming up the slope behind him. The big man moved so fast! The damned jumpjet still hung in the air and then something exploded nearby and Kemperer ran hard towards an outcrop of glittering spires.

He turned three corners and saw a narrow opening in sandstone at the base of one massive crystal and wriggled into it and lay still, trying to control his breathing.

Sweat ran down his face and one drop clung itchily to the tip of his nose, but the hollow in which he lay was so confined that he couldn't reach it. He could see only a few lucid facets, a patch of sandstone. And then a shadow fell across it all.

Kemperer stopped breathing; the skin of his head was trying to crawl down his back. The bodyguard stepped forward slowly, towards Kemperer's hiding place.

And everything was filled with light!

The bodyguard toppled like a tower, hitting a crystal face and rolling over; the sound of the explosion shook the spires like the sound of his fall. His hand clenched and unclenched around his pistol, centimetres from Kemperer's face. Then he was still.

Amarez must have been looking at the jumpjet when it blew; for all that his eyes were wide open, he was groping his way between glittering crystal slabs with his arms stretched before him, unsteady, hesitant, blind. When he heard Kemperer coming towards him he stopped, his head cocked at an angle. Tears stained his hollow cheeks.

"Kemperer?"

"Right."

Amarez felt his way to a level slab and sat, his head weaving back and forth. "I suppose you got my bodyguard."

"The crystals did. They transformed a lot of the energy of the explosion into radio waves. Your bodyguard always was affected by their normal output, but this fried his wires. He's dead, I'm afraid."

Amarez knuckled his eyes. "That's some trick."

"You'll be able to see in a minute, Seyour Amarez."

"Ah. You are waiting because you have scruples about killing a blind man."

"I suppose once I would have killed you. Not now." It was true; Kemperer had thrown away the bodyguard's pistol.

"Then why did you do this? Forgive my curiosity."

"To stop you destroying some people's lives."

"Come now, this will not stop anything. I'm a big part of it, of course, but by no means all."

"You're the one I can touch, and you're the front man too. It will take you a long time to walk out of here, Seyour, and you should not hope to be found: we are a long way off our charted course. Besides, even if the wreckage is found, no one will think of looking for survivors. With you gone things will surely slow down, and perhaps your disappearance will make the right people think about what you've been doing."

"You're clever, I'll give you that," Amarez said, turning his head from side to side. "You know this world, you can help me out — and I'll be generous. I could even take you to Earth, Kemperer. You could see your wife again."

His wife. Kemperer saw her turning to him across a field of snow, her shadow thrown towards him by Earth's platinum sun — and Amarez, his arms wide, crashed into Kemperer, knocking him to the ground and blindly trying to pin his arms, searching for the pistol he was certain Kemperer had. But Kemperer kicked out, catching Amarez in the stomach, and pushed free.

"Okay," Amarez gasped, and pushed up to squat on his haunches. He tried to smile. "You have to admit it was worth a try. Listen, Kemperer, you're not going to leave me out here. Not when I can give you so much."

But Kemperer knew that Amarez had nothing to give him. He had grown beyond dreams of his wife, of the Earth. All around was the glittering reality of his world.

He said, raising his voice to disguise his cautious backwards progress, "There's food and water if you think hard, look carefully. The capital's about two hundred kilometres to the south-east, a couple of weeks' walking. And as you travel learn to understand the land. You'll see." He was near the top of the slope now.

"I'll keep my promise," Amarez said, "if you'll help me." Vague patches, blurred lozenges of light, were beginning to push into the pulsing darkness of his fused sight. Soon he would be able to see, and this time he would make no mistake. All he had to do was keep talking, and so he pleaded and prom-

ised and cajoled. But there was no reply, and at last he broke off, his head cocked. He called out Kemperer's name, called louder, his smooth voice edged with panic, then stood and staggered forward. Arms wide he knocked hard into a crystal spur, so hard his head rang. He clutched a burning facet, tried to blink back his sight.

"Damn you, Kemperer! I loved her too!"

But Kemperer was too far away to hear him, out among the stones, heading home.



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FORWARD FROM WHAT VANISHES

I endure this progression not for illumination
but for sleeplike darkness. Windows would serve
no purpose: sunlight resides in memory only.

Flames damp to nothing, and the light of revelation
is just mirrored forward from behind. I observe
what I have left in the past, and that only.

This airless progress yields no consolation
to the traveler. I have what I can preserve,
which never resolves clearer, which fades only.

— Mark Rich

HARBARD
by Larry Walker
art: Roger Raupp



Though currently living in Malabar, Florida, Larry Walker grew up on a farm in southern Minnesota. He has sold three short stories to Amazing® Stories, of which this tale is the third. His most recent appearance in the magazine was his "Death-Shade," which appeared in our September 1986 issue.

With a "Yipe!" the wolf flew over Thorbjorg's bent back and pitched into the river. The current took it.

Thorbjorg jerked up, dropping the stone in his right hand, almost dropping the sack in his left. He spun, turned his ankle, and fell in a sweet bed of golden wildflowers on the riverbank. He rubbed the ankle and groaned. The sack beside him moved a bit, but its mouth had been tied.

He shook his head and squinted around at the crowding mountains. They scowled back. Everything in Norway seemed to be scowling at him lately. He felt light-headed, as if with drink. But that couldn't be.

The river rushed before him, not wide, but joyful with spring melt. On the other side the graybeard ferryman stretched his long legs and raised his hat-brim.

"That wolf nearly had you!" he called.

"What wolf?" said Thorbjorg. He was in no mood. The old sausage-casing had snored through his every shout and whistle. Only now he wakened, in time to see him make a fool of himself.

"You don't often see a wolf go after a man," the ferryman said. He lowered his hat again. Thorbjorg grabbed a stone, as before, to throw at him. He got to his feet. Then he sat down again. He got up and braced against the branch of a rowan tree.

"Are you a ferryman?" he called. "Or just a drunkard sleeping it off?"

The old man sat up. "I am Harbard," he said, "and this is my ferry. It runs when I like. Just now I like to enjoy what's left of the afternoon's sun. It's dear in this valley."

"I can't wait!" said Thorbjorg.

"What's the matter with you youngsters is hasty blood. You needn't hurry. All you'll get is older." The old man lay back again.

Thorbjorg threw his stone. It missed.

He fell on the bank and frowned. He fumbled in the front of his shirt and drew out an acorn-cap. Looking into its hollow he said, "What do I do now?"

The voice answered him. A rich green voice, fair as the sea, with ice in it. He shivered to hear it. As always.

"Offer him silver," it said.

"I don't have any silver."

"HARBARD doesn't know that. You'll have plenty soon."

Thorbjorg rose and called, "I'll pay you five ounces of silver!"

Slowly Harbard sat up. "Silver is easily promised," he said, "but it travels rarely with such shabby britches. You're no great man. You're unarmed. Your face wants washing. I judge you a runaway thrall. Go home — your master may let you off with a beating."

"I am Thorbjorg, son of Thorstein, a free man well known in Halledal!"

"A laughingstock in Halledal! You have black hair, like all your brothers — bad blood from you mother's mother, well known to have been a Lappish

witch."

"Lies! And what if my hair is dark? King Harald Fine-hair's father was called 'the Black.' And who are you? Is a ferryman a jarl?"

"I've crossed swords with jarls. Once I cut the blood-eagle in a king. I've had enough to do with great men to know little ones when I see them."

"Tell him about Ireland," said the voice.

"I don't want to talk about Ireland!" Thorbjorg whispered.

"There'll be more wolves."

"I stood with jarls in Ireland! A mighty army of Norwegians and Danes! A hundred thousand Gaels rushed naked at our shield-wall. We hewed them until the blood flowed above our ankles. Then we took their wealth and their women!"

"Everybody knows what you did in Ireland," said Harbard.

Thorbjorg whispered, "I knew I shouldn't have brought it up."

"They say that when the Irish axe-men screamed, you filled your ragged britches."

"I wasn't alone in that! I stood as well as any, for two whole days! Three days! And a night!"

"They say that when the loot was divided, you got drunk and let a dice-sharp win your share. Then you fought three men for a wench and fell asleep before you'd got her skirts up. She left you snoring with a cheese in your arms. The battle-jarls still tell the story. 'Cheese-Thorbjorg' they call you."

"Thor himself is no stronger than ale!"

"Don't fret. The wench was cross-eyed, and toothless."

"You lie!"

"Speaking of lies, what did you tell your father when you came home empty-handed?"

Thorbjorg turned and struck his head on the rowan branch. He fell down. He kept his grip on the sack, but dropped the acorn-cap. He cursed as he searched for it in the flowers.

He found it at last. It said, "You're a bore when you sulk."

Harbard seemed interested now. He stood up, leaning on a heavy staff. "I heard your father boxed your ears and kicked you off the farm. He said to come back when you'd learned not to be a bloody fool. Your Irish loot should have gone to your jarl, who'd have given you rings and weapons and made you his man. Instead, where are you? Here you are. Goes to show."

"I have to cross the river!"

Harbard sat down again.

Thorbjorg looked about him for something to throw. But his hands were full. He fell down.

Not far off, up the mountainside, a wolf howled.

The valley was darkening.

"Tell him what's in the sack," said the voice.

"I don't want to talk about the sack," said Thorbjorg.

Harbard asked, "What's in the sack?"

Thorbjorg held it to his chest. He could feel it moving. "What's it to you?" he called.

"It's a joke to me."

"Hel take you, and your sneers, and your ferry!" Thorbjorg got up, returning the acorn-cap to his shirt. "You think I'm a fool, do you? No great man? You'd laugh out the other hole if you knew what I've got here!"

"I'd not be alone."

"There's a baby in this sack! Not just any baby! It's the daughter of the King of the Shape-shifters, who lives under the mountain yonder! I came to his door under the full moon. I killed a sheep on his doorstep. I stripped and smeared myself with its blood, and sang troll-songs in the cold. He had to let me in."

"I daresay the neighbors were complaining."

"He honored me in his hall — my spell compelled him. It's a mighty cavern — wide as this valley. A thousand carved pillars march down its length. The floor is strewn with the sweetest pine boughs and spring flowers, and the benches are cushioned with pelts of fox and marten. All the table goods are silver and gold, and Rhenish glass. Five hundred thralls race up and down with smoking bowls from the kitchens.

"The king bade me sit by him in the High Seat. He gave me rich meats and sweet mead. When he wasn't looking, I poured most of the mead under the table. I drank whey instead."

"Ah! You learn!"

"And when he and his household were drunken senseless, I crept to the cradle in the corner. I lulled the baby with a little mead and put it in the sack. I bluffed my way past the guards at the door, and here I am. The king will pay a fine ransom once you bring me over, for shape-shifters can't cross running water."

Harbard rolled back on the grass and hooted.

Thorbjorg bent for another stone. A growl from behind spun him around. Dropping the sack, he met the wolf with the stone, cracking it on the ear. It fell and rolled, then came up at him, teeth bared.

"You're dead already, child-thief;" it growled.

"Not by you, burr-tail."

It leaped for his throat. Thorbjorg knocked it aside, but got his arm torn. The man and the man-wolf circled each other, snarling, bleeding.

"You're a clown," the wolf said. "You don't even know what you fight for."

"I fight for silver and gold! All I can carry. Run back to your king and tell him that!"

It sprang, and Thorbjorg swung his stone underhanded, catching it beneath the jaw. It crumpled at his feet and he fell on it and choked its life

out.

He grabbed the fur at the nape of the neck and jerked. It came away in a piece, and a skinny, naked man lay on the grass, his face bloody and blue. Thorbjorg kicked him into the river, then threw the fur cloak in after.

"A cloak like that could be handy," said Harbard.

Thorbjorg looked at him, swaying. "Shape-shifters are vermin," he said. "And child-thieves are not?"

"I'm an honest man. Shape-shifters are outlaw."

"I see little to choose between you."

"Then you see nothing. When shape-shifters steal children, they eat them." Thorbjorg leaned on the rowan branch, looking about with weary eyes. Useless. The mountain shadows were a shifter's cloak over the valley — enemies seemed everywhere.

He checked the sack. The form inside still wriggled, the thongs were secure at the mouth. A drop of blood plopped onto the cloth. Thorbjorg put a hand to his wound and winced.

He drew out the acorn-cap. "*Don't dawdle*," the voice said. "*Get across the river!*"

Old Harbard was watching. "I'll grant you this," he said, "you put on a show. Perhaps I'll let you cross. But first you must show me what's in the sack."

"I told you what's in the sack."

"Bear with me."

Thorbjorg scowled, but he tucked the acorn-cap away and fumbled with the thong. He freed it and looked inside. His jaw dropped.

Harbard's laugh boomed out and rolled back from the mountains.

A pink piglet leaped from the sack and trotted away down the riverbank.

"Fool!" Harbard roared. "Do you think the King of the Shape-shifters was taken in? He'd charmed you before you took a step in his hall. Nothing was what you thought it — least of all the child!"

"She had golden hair," murmured Thorbjorg, "and the brightest blue eyes. . . ."

Far off, a bear roared.

Thorbjorg threw the sack at Harbard. It sailed into the river and was carried away. "Why do the man-wolves hunt me, then?"

"Because you tried to cozen their king. Great men are proud. You wouldn't understand."

"To Hel with great men, and to Hel with you!" Thorbjorg's knees buckled, and he threw an arm around the rowan branch.

He fumbled in his shirt for the acorn-cap. He said to it, "Help me."

No reply.

"Help me!"

No sound.

"She's gone," said Harbard. His voice seemed low, but Thorbjorg heard

it clearly.

He looked at the old man. A sob rose in his throat, but he fought it.

"You're a fool, Thorbjorg Thorsteinsson," said Harbard. "A sweet form she had, hair like flame, sea-green eyes, a voice chill as a glacier-torrent. The elf-maid wound her finger in your hair and led you like a milk calf."

"She said I'd be a great man. She said I'd be her husband. All I need do was follow her plan, and all the men who'd laughed at me would lay their heads on my knee. Was it a lie? All a joke on me?"

"Yes."

"And now she's left me in this valley, with my foes at my back and you before me. And you won't let me cross, will you?"

"No."

"Always it's the great men. Always I'm a fool before the great men! And now at last I'm a fool before you, and you're the greatest of all."

HARBARD SAID NOTHING.

"I know you!" Thorbjorg bellowed. "Don't think I don't! I mark the hat and the staff and the gray beard! You have one eye, not so?"

HARBARD GRINNED. HIS TEETH WERE VERY LONG AND WHITE.

"You talk of great men!" said Thorbjorg. "I've seen great men go down in their youth, in a good cause, and where were you? I've seen scoundrels raised high. And most of us live in between, and your foot's on our necks our whole lives long, and you mock us!"

"You never deal fairly! Never! Never!"

"NEVER!" CAME THE REPLY.

"I spit on you! I spit on you, and on elf-maids, and on shape-shifters, and on great men most of all! The beasts are coming for me, and I'll fight them and die. I'll die such a death as you say you love, but I curse you dying. Because I've given my best, foolish or wise, and you are a clutch-penny chief who gives nothing to brave men!"

Something whistled and shone in the dusk. It spun over the river and struck, shivering, in the rowan trunk.

AN AXE IT WAS. BEARDED, SILVER-CHASED, IT HAD A COLLAR AND A GOOD, LONG HANDLE.

"THAT IS WHAT I GIVE BRAVE MEN!" CRIED HARBARD, WHOSE NAME IS ODIN. "FOOLISH OR WISE! I NEVER PROMISED MORE!"

THORBJORG WRENCHED IT FREE.

"AND WHAT IF THE SHAPE-SHIFTERS COME AT ME ALL AT ONCE?" HE ASKED, THUMBING THE EDGE.

"THEY SELDOM DO. BUT IF THEY SHOULD, WHY, THEN YOU GET TO CROSS THE RIVER!"

THE BEAR GROWLED IN THE SHADOWS.

THORBJORG TURNED TO FACE IT.



THE FANTASTIC BATTLEFIELD

by Roland J. Green

LITERARY REVIEW

Roland J. Green has a B.A. from Oberlin College and an M.A. from the University of Chicago, both in political science. His military-related work includes the WANDOR series (heroic fantasy), Peace Company, and two collaborations, Great Kings' War (with John Carr) and Clan and Crown (originated by Jerry Pournelle), which is the second novel in the JANISSARIES series.

Roland currently lives in Chicago, Illinois, with his author-wife, Frieda A. Murray, and his daughter, Violette.

In Voices Prophesying War, I. F. Clarke mentions an 18th-century tale of a war in 1920: King George VI of England leads his army against Vienna, capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Two centuries earlier, in his *Art of War*, Niccolo Machiavelli described an ideal Italian "legion" and showed it winning an imaginary battle.

So war and its brawling family (terrorism, assassination, etc.) have a long history in speculative fiction. Even peaceful utopias frequently deal with the causes of war, in showing how peace came about.

Why this amount of speculation about war? There's no such thing as a completely comprehensive list of why authors do anything. Every author brings a unique set of motivations to his work; the ones he can or will talk about in public are only part of the total. I offer only a rough-and-ready classification.

(1) Technological speculation. At least since Victorian times this has been a major theme in speculative fiction. War has generated more of the last century's technological progress

than any other human institution; its appeal for the playing-with-new-devices author is obvious.

(2) Social speculation. War is far more than the clash of embattled hardware. It is one of the most complex human activities, one which reflects every aspect of the societies waging it. Any speculative writer who wants to radically test a favorite (or unfavorite) social institution or value can always throw it into the melting pot of war. Many have.

(3) Advocacy. Since defeat in war can be the ultimate failure, it comes ready to hand for the "If this goes on . . ." story. These have a long if not universally honorable history. The first such awful warning to reach a wide audience was "The Battle of Dorking," written in 1870 by a British army officer. It showed how easily England could be invaded and conquered by a Germany that had defeated the Royal Navy; it argued for a larger army raised by conscription.

The latest incarnations of the awful warning are undoubtedly those strangely paired twins, the post-

holocaust survivalist story and the post-holocaust peace sermon. In the peace sermon, the defeat is that the war took place at all. The story in both is often drowned out by the sound of grinding axes, although both have survived this danger in sufficiently skilled hands.

(4) **“What if. . . ?”** The basic question of all speculative fiction, focused on a military topic. A fair amount of what iffy comes out under headings (2) and (3), but not all. Military questions loom particularly large in alternate histories. Indeed, the writing of alternate histories for years was ruled by the Great Man and Decisive Battle school of historiography; often the great man was also a winner of the decisive battle. This inevitably affected the prestige and readability of alternate histories for those who knew there was more to history than kings and battles. In the hands of the new breed of historically literate adventure/fantasy writers, the alternate history seems to be making a spectacular comeback.

(5) **Conflict.** When all other reasons for putting a battle into a story fall by the wayside, this one marches on. Conflict is at the heart of any fiction, whether intended as literature or entertainment. Without conflict, the writer has at best an interesting exercise in technique, not a story.

The emotional impact of the conflict depends largely on how much is at stake. In battle or war, the characters may have at stake their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor,” to say nothing of their families, homes, and principles.

Battle and war are an *open sesame* to engaging the reader’s emotions. Nor are they an *open sesame* used exclusively by militaristic or lazy writers. Sermonizing and laziness have cer-

tainly hung around the neck of military SF like the Ancient Mariner’s albatross, getting riper by the year. They do not and cannot invalidate a whole theme.

A Historical Sketch

The modern history of speculation about war begins in the Victorian era. At that point clear-sighted people realized that the future’s technology would differ from the present, let alone the past. The wisest also realized that this new technology would change society. *How* was hard to predict but would certainly make good stories.

Jules Verne and H. G. Wells stand at the head of the class in this as in most other areas of speculative fiction. Verne concerned himself more with the technological marvels (the submarine, the airship), while Wells went on to consider the social impact of these marvels. His *The War of the Worlds* is not only the classic story of interplanetary invasion. It is also a compelling portrait of technological warfare disrupting organized society, all the more prophetic in the light of two world wars.

Wells did not always go so far. His “The Land Ironclads” is a straightforward hardware-in-action prediction of the tank. He and Verne also both made one blunder, failing to realize the enormous supporting effort modern weaponry would require. The dirigibles in Wells’s *The War in the Air* have hardly more logistical “tail” than cavalry regiments (to say nothing of the fact that a hydrogen-filled dirigible is an accident looking for a place to happen).

World War I ended an era in speculation about war, along with a great many lives. During the pulp era of the late 1920s and 1930s, war was more

often than not a simple springboard to an adventure tale. The genre of sword-and-sorcery also emerged, featuring medieval or at least pre-gunpowder levels of military technology. This left free play for the hero's usually improbable prowess in personal combat.

As far as war producing technological change, World War II was the Big Bang, long before Hiroshima. This particular universe has in fact gone on expanding right up to the current debate about the Strategic Defense Initiative, and shows no signs of stopping. At times the wonder-weapon story has degenerated into tech fiction that is barely speculative at all.

At other times and in more skilled hands, the technology has been only one of several factors. In Robert A. Heinlein's *Sixth Column*, The Pan-Asians are confronted by a technology so superior that it might as well be magic. However, it is the Temples of Mota that confuse them long enough for that technology to be put into the hands of an American army of liberation.

In the 1950s the Cold War laid its hand on military SF. An inordinate amount of it featured "us good guys" smiting "them bad guys," usually disguised "Commies," sometimes not even disguised. This was the last era in which the magazines dominated SF, so the bulk of the material was short fiction. That had almost as much effect as the politics; short stories have built-in limitations for doing more with battles than providing fast-moving entertainment.

One writer who went beyond the battlefield in both novels and short stories was Gordon R. Dickson. His tales of the Dorsai, interstellar mercenaries and archetypical warriors, have so far dominated his grand Childe Cycle (or at least readers' perceptions

of it). The Dorsai have also been one of the most influential concepts in military SF, even for those writers who disagree with some of Dickson's conclusions about war.

Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* enjoys a similar status. Its Hugo Award in 1959 was and remains controversial, but it is not a book that can be ignored. Indeed, its speculation about the ethics of a military organization and the place of military service in civil society have worn better than its power-armored Mobile Infantry-men.

The Cold War pushed military SF one way. The Vietnam War pushed it in the opposite direction, very nearly into the outer darkness. Speculation about war gave way to assertions of its immorality (or refutations of these assertions). Some of both have worn well enough, thanks to their writers' skill — Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* stands out.

The abuse of technology in the Vietnam War and the ecology movement also affected technological speculation in military SF. Many readers and not a few writers came to want their battles without defoliants, napalm, and a non-combatant rear echelon. For these people, the revival of fantasy that followed the paperback publication of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was a gift. The revival continued with the reprinting of Robert E. Howard's swashbuckling *Conan* stories, and has hardly fallen off since.

The fantasy revival has changed the whole face of speculation about war, however. Along with social-science SF, it brought into the field a whole battalion of women writers. They tended to have a greater concern with characterization, a clearer perception of the human costs of war, but less knowledge of or interest in strategy, tactics,

and weaponry — often too little.

The first results of this battalion's taking the field were a proliferation of Amazon fantasies and mixed-sex armed forces. Sturgeon's Law has operated here as everywhere: now that the taboos have been broken, many of the taboo-breaking stories have little else to recommend them. A permanent change has still been made, and one very much for the better.

Since the late 1970s, military SF has revived on a grand scale. There are a good many reasons for this, starting with a high-grossing motion picture that, as Reginald Bretnor has pointed out, was not called "Star Peace."

George Lucas shouted and let loose the avalanche, which swept away all previous limitations on the size of the SF/fantasy market. Jerry Pournelle and Ursula LeGuin could now coexist, if not peacefully, at least not in a zero-sum competition for publishers' dollars. Upswings and downswings continue, but the floor is higher than ever and likely to stay that way.

This new elbow room means that every brand of speculation about war that has an audience can find publishers. Since these brands run from "Rambo goes to the stars" to undisguised pacifist tracts, the field is not only larger than before, it is more diverse. Fantasy remains somewhat limited by the pre-gunpowder convention, but historically informed fantasy writers have discovered that doesn't limit them to swordswingers of either sex.

Outside the SF community, there has been what both its friends and enemies consider a revival of patriotism. Looked at more closely, that label seems only marginally accurate. Most of the change is the decline of two of the more witless aspects of anti-military ideology of the 1960s and

1970s:

(1) "Complete ignorance about war proves you're for peace."

(2) "Trashing a Vietnam veteran proves you're for peace."

Peace is now being pursued, if not more effectively, at least at a somewhat more adult level.

This has had consequences for military SF. Ignorance wrapped in politically proper sentiments no longer holds sway. Whether one likes or loathes soldiers, it is acceptable and even encouraged to depict them as fully fledged human beings.

There has also been an enormous boom in good popular military history, particularly from the common soldier's viewpoint. The would-be military-SF writer no longer has to choose among jingoistic tracts, ponderous official histories, and academic studies that minutely dissect everything except the battle itself.

This historical cornucopia has been particularly good for women writers. With the political and cultural barriers to their learning about war removed, they are producing some of the most innovative and readable speculation on the subject, in both SF and fantasy.

The State of an Art

Strategy and Tactics (or, *The Eagle and the Worm*). Military experts have shed much ink over the difference between strategy and tactics. If there is a consensus, it is that tactics involves the movements of forces in contact with the enemy and strategy involves moving them to the contact point.

Whatever definitions one uses, current military SF is stronger at the tactical level than at the strategic. There are both explanations and excuses for this.

The emotional impact of a character in danger is greater than that of a character solving a problem that puts others in danger. It is also much easier to show the human cost of war on the battlefield than in the command post. So both literary and commercial considerations exert their pressure, and military SF slides deeper into the trenches.

To make strategic decision-making interesting requires more than the desire to show it. It needs both extensive research and considerable technical skill. Research is always time-consuming, and the slog through sources sometimes begins to resemble a World War I battle — much effort and little gain. The research may also do no more than convince the would-be writer that there are no new strategies under the sun, or at least none that his skill is adequate to make interesting.

The Vietnam War has also had its impact. This was a war in which American strategy was less than successful, and American strategists discredited. Even those whose names were known were as alien to the average draftee as H. G. Wells's Martians.

Strategists and tacticians alike need to paste one enduring principle over their typewriters. It is the Army War College maxim: "No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy."

Logistics (or, *The Tail of the Teeth*). Logistics is the art and science of handing the combat soldier the tools needed to do the job. These tools have become both numerous and expensive. A modern American division in combat requires a rather appalling five hundred tons of supplies a day, and less than a third of its men are actually in the business of shooting and being shot at.

There are ways around this di-

lemma. The Israelis have found one — keep your wars short and localized. (An Israeli tank division is likely to fight its battles no more than two hours' drive from its depot.) The Russians have found another — send a division up, and when it runs out of supplies or gets shot to pieces, replace it with another complete division. Both of these approaches are worth more exploration than they have received so far.

There's little doubt that logistics is another difficult subject to research thoroughly and write about interestingly. There's even less doubt that rear-echelon people have never been popular heroes, from the army of the Assyrians to the army of Westmoreland. Few readers fantasize about being pay clerks, and few pacifists see the motor pool sergeant as either villain or victim. But read a good history of the Crimean War to see what happens to any remotely modern army without them!

Weaponry and Equipment (or, *There is a God of Battles and His Name is Murphy*). Modern high-technology weaponry is enormously powerful — frequently too powerful to be used indiscriminately in close proximity to whoever is currently defined as an innocent bystander. American firepower was devastatingly effective in Vietnam, but not always to the right targets. Target-seeking or computerized "smart" weapons have improved accuracy somewhat since Vietnam, but the new hardware enormously increases the cost of each individual weapon.

Modern weaponry also requires a great deal of maintenance, by expensively trained experts who can't do their job too close to the shooting. The easily replaceable "black box" has proved a mixed blessing. It puts the

machine containing the box back into action quickly, but leaves you with a malfunctioning box to be fixed. Not to mention what happens when the depot runs out of the right kind of box and the nearest fresh supply is back in the United States (on Earth, in the Solar System . . .).

The sheer physical dimensions of modern weaponry is something to be considered in arming a super-trooper. Stories filled with tanks and missiles frequently ignore the weight of the one and the size of the other. Short of the discovery of antigravity, it's long odds against any armored unit ever being moved from one planet to another. And the "space torpedo" of so many fine stories is more likely to resemble an intercontinental missile, which means that the number your starship can carry is likely to be limited, and where is the nearest ammunition ship . . .?

A final factor not wisely ignored is the physical effects of modern weapons on their users. Night-vision devices turn night into day and night-sighted soldiers into night-blind ones. Many modern tanks cannot use their full cross-country speed; their suspension can't protect their crews from a pounding that can produce kidney damage and whiplash. The modern soldier needs protection from two arsenals — the enemy's and his own.

Robert A. Heinlein summarized a fundamental fact of war in *Starship Troopers*: "If you load a mud foot down with a lot of gadgets he has to watch, someone a lot more simply equipped — say with a stone ax — will sneak up and bash his head in while he's trying to read a vernier."

Society and Economics (or, You Can't Hardly Get Good Cannon Fodder No More). Well-done fiction of any kind has been compared to an iceberg

— seven eighths of the author's work is invisible. What the reader sees is only the tip.

For most stories, the social and economic background is part of the iceberg. It still needs some thought and care. Otherwise the writer finishes the story with the need to jack up the tip and shove an iceberg in under it. Even worse is forgetting the iceberg completely. This will cause readers to doubt one's skill, and maybe ancestry and habits.

In modern societies there are hardly enough raw peasant conscripts to make up an army. The only exception is the Soviet Union, and even it is having trouble filling up the ranks with Great Russians. The Kremlin is turning more and more to non-Russians, tough, docile, but not necessarily politically reliable if it ever becomes a question of upholding Great Russian rule.

A modern army that contains nobody from any dissenting group or minority is like a supply system that always delivers enough on time. It infallibly brands the story in which it appears as fantasy, not science fiction — and the inferior "anything can happen" fantasy at that.

Or consider the mercenary. Historically, most mercenary units effective over a long time have been recruited from homogeneous populations. Those that haven't been depend on either charismatic leadership or ferocious discipline. Both are worth exploring, as opposed to romanticizing; it also helps to consider whether the ferocious discipline will pass unquestioned by the legion's society or even by all of the legionnaires.

Fantasy (or, I Ran That Sorcerer Through Because He Was a Poor Speller). Much of the new material in military history concerns the pre-

gunpowder past, the territory of fantasy writers. A picture is emerging, of warfare much more complex and much less "Hack at 'em!" than we used to believe.

For one thing, both professional mercenaries and technical experts (siege engineers, etc.) played a much larger role much earlier than used to be thought. Mercenaries and feudal levies coexisted as soon as there was enough cash to pay the former. Furthermore, many mercenaries were quite respectable feudal landholders, whose own holdings were barely above the minimum-fief level. Not wanting to spend their lives in the medieval equivalent of a McDonald's franchise, they went off to peddle their swords to suitable bidders.

Mercenaries are only one area where some thought about economics is essential. Fantasy has been loaded down like a dying pack horse with stories that ignore the number of peasants required to support one wandering barbarian swordsperson. A ratio of a hundred to one would be conservative.

The picture is not changing so fast on weaponry and equipment. This means, of course, that there is little excuse for gross inaccuracies — the "twenty-pound broadsword" should be going the way of "the sunblasted deserts of Jupiter."

The Society for Creative Anachronism has fallen well short of its original goals in researching the Middle Ages. However, somebody in any large chapter is likely to be able to put you on to reliable books. Also, having a horseman and a farmer ready to hand will do no fantasy writer any harm. The riding and draft animals of pre-industrial war have gone unfed, unburied, and unsung for too long.

Women in Combat (or, There's an

Alien in My Sleeping Bag!). Any statement on any aspect of this subject is tiptoeing through something that resembles a minefield more than it does tulips. However . . .

An intense group bonding is at the heart of combat effectiveness. Soldiers fight more to avoid letting their comrades down than for any other reason. In most times and climes, this has been a *male* group bond. The great question: is the "maleness" an essential part of the bond? Or is it the result of circumstances (many good and sufficient) that have made combat units usually all-male? Will the experience of combat set the bonds of a mixed unit as firmly?

That isn't a question likely to be answered in the lifetime of anyone reading this article. Even if it is answered in the affirmative, other problems remain to be solved. Modern technology has not eliminated the need for sheer physical strength, even when it works. When it doesn't, one finds armies reverting two thousand years. In 1982 the Royal Marines slogged toward Port Stanley under a load that would have made a Roman legionary feel quite at home. They were supposed to ride in helicopters, but the Argentine Air Force sank the helicopters at sea.

One suspects that the least-mixed units will always be the infantry rifle battalions. They have the most demands for a level of muscle found more often in men than women. They are also more exposed to capture by opponents with radically different cultural standards, a problem that helped drive women out of Israeli combat units. Finally, they are the most vulnerable to the "weaker sex" syndrome — an injured woman is to be protected, and hang the mission! — which has deep cultural roots not

likely to be pulled up in one generation.

One also suspects that when fully integrated combat units emerge, they will need two things many modern forces lack. One is very high *esprit de corps*, and the other is what amounts to an incest taboo, enforced by that *esprit de corps*. Otherwise the amount of sexual harassment or even legitimate canoodling could get as out of hand as the most obstinately misogynistic lieutenant general could imagine.

I hope that the problems of women in combat will be solved. As long as war is a human institution, serving as a soldier will be one of the ultimate responsibilities of the citizen. Any group barred from assuming that responsibility will be second-class citizens. Relegating women to that status no longer makes any sense from any point of view.

Simple Rules and Few

(1) Research. There is no such thing as too much, particularly for a novel.

(2) Analogues. Look for contemporary ones for future units and weapons. A nuclear submarine has a great deal in common with a military spaceship. The U.S. Navy's Aegis system forecasts the kind of radar that spaceship will carry.

(3) Characterization. Never forget that your soldier was a human being for a good many years before he/she put on a uniform. Never forget also that soldiers are overworked and bored 99% of the time and shot at only 1%.

(4) Multiple viewpoint. It eases the conflict between strategic and tactical levels and combat and rear-echelon characters. It's also essential for a realistic, comprehensible battle

scene. This makes the novel or at best novella the best form for military SF.

(5) Fairness. Remember that no one is "the enemy" in his own eyes. Also remember that anyone who has put on a uniform and gone into battle has at least done enough to earn a fair and informed judgment.

Good hunting.

Reading List

This list only scratches the surface of my reading — which in turn barely scratches the surface of the literature on the subject.

Nonfiction

Anderson, Poul, "On Thud and Blunder" in Andrew J. Offutt (editor), *Sword Against Darkness III* (Zebra, 1978). Common mistakes in writing heroic fantasy.

Atwell, Lester, *Private* (Popular Library, 1963). Unpretentious, vivid personal memoir of the U.S. Army in Northwest Europe, 1944-45.

Catton, Bruce. *The Civil War*, treated with compassion, scholarship, and grace of language. Start with the *Army of the Potomac Trilogy* (various editions).

Chandler, David, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (Macmillan, 1966). The best one-volume study of the subject.

Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War* (Princeton, 1976). Translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, the first complete and reliable English version.

Elting, John R., et. al., *A Dictionary of Soldier Talk* (Scribner's, 1984). A brilliantly witty compilation of terminology in the American armed forces.

Friedman, Richard S., et. al., *Advanced Technology Warfare* (Crown, 1985). The most up-to-date one-

volume study of what the near future may hold.

Ing, Dean, and Leik Myrabo, *The Future of Flight* (Baen, 1985). Explores the next century's spaceplanes, beamed-power aircraft, and deep-space vehicles.

Herbert, Anthony B., with James T. Wotten, *Soldier* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973). Memoirs of a dedicated and decorated infantry veteran of both Korea and Vietnam, driven out of the army by the CYA syndrome.

Hogg, Ian V. A witty expert on the history of weaponry and fortifications. Generally recommended.

Holm, Jeanne, *Women in the Military* (Presidio, 1982). An intelligent discussion, by the first woman in American military history to retire as a major general (Air Force).

Holmes, Richard, *Acts of War* (Free Press, 1986). The best study of the military experience to date, running from the 17th century to the Falklands. Indispensable.

Keegan, John, *The Face of Battle* (Viking, 1976). A pioneering study in what actually happens on the battlefield.

Mauldin, Bill, *Up Front* (World, 1945). The famous cartoonist's first book. Willie and Joe are the Universal Infantryman.

Middlebrook, Martin, *Operation Corporate* (Viking, 1986). The best history of the Falklands War of 1982.

Schiff, Ze'ev, *A History of the Israeli Army* (Macmillan, 1986; 2nd edition). The best one-volume study of the most original and effective fighting force of the 20th century.

Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War* (Oxford, 1963). The Samuel B. Griffith translation of the classic Chinese work.

Slim, Field Marshal Sir William, *Defeat into Victory* (Cassell, 1956). Possibly the best memoirs to come out

of the war; certainly the most revealing about the art of generalship.

Fiction

Allen, Roger MacBride, *The Torch of Honor* (Baen, 1985). A future space navy battles a fascist dictatorship, begins a promising series.

Anderson, Poul, *The High Crusade* (various editions). Medieval Englishmen overthrow an alien interstellar empire in self-defense.

Bunting, Josiah, *The Lionheads* (George Braziller, 1972). How politics and careerism killed soldiers in Vietnam.

Brin, David, *The Postman* (Bantam Spectra, 1985). A refugee in post-holocaust America pretends that he represents a restored government. Outstanding.

Bujold, Lois McMaster, *Shards of Honor* (Baen, 1986). "Boy meets girl" — both of them officers on opposing sides in an interstellar war. An extraordinary first novel.

Card, Orson Scott, *Ender's Game* (Tor, 1985). Powerful novel of how six-year-old misfit Ender Wiggins becomes the military genius needed to save Earth from aliens.

Carl, Lillian Stewart, *Sabazel* (Ace, 1985). An intelligent, logical, and generally superior handling of the Amazon theme.

Clancy, Tom, *The Hunt for RED OCTOBER* (Naval Institute Press, 1984). Probably the best novel yet written about modern submarines.

Dickson, Gordon R. Start with *The Spirit of Dorsai* (Ace, 1979) and *Lost Dorsai* (Ace, 1980).

Drake, David. Popular and prolific; good battle scenes. Try *(At Any Price*, Baen, 1985) and *(Ranks of Bronze*, Baen, 1986).

Forester, C. S. Start with the

Hornblower saga, then go on to *The Ship* (various editions).

Goodrich, Marcus, *Delilah* (Farrar and Rinehart, 1941). Life aboard an obsolete American destroyer on the eve of World War I.

Haldeman, Joe, *The Forever War* (St. Martin's, 1974). Haldeman's Vietnam experience translated into an award-winning novel of endless interstellar conflict.

Hambly, Barbara, *The Ladies of Mandrigyn* (Del Rey, 1985). The city of Mandrigyn suddenly loses its men through sorcery; the women must see to their own defense.

Heinlein, Robert A., *Starship Troopers* (various editions). A classic of military SF; superb battle scenes and serious concerns.

Ing, Dean, *Systemic Shock* (Ace), *Single Combat* (Tor), and *Wild Country* (Tor). Technically-detailed, gripping post-holocaust trilogy.

Jones, Douglas C., *The Court Martial of George Armstrong Custer* (Scribner's, 1976). What if Custer had been the sole survivor of the Little Bighorn?

Masters, John. Start with his two volumes of autobiography, *Bugles and a Tiger* and *The Road Past Mandalay* (various editions).

Monsarrat, Nicholas, *The Cruel Sea*

(Knopf, 1953). The Battle of the Atlantic, a panoramic classic.

Niven, Larry, and Jerry Pournelle, *Footfall* (Del Rey, 1985). An alien invasion, masterfully depicted on the grand scale.

Piper, H. Beam. Three novels in particular: *Space Viking*, *Uller Uprising*, and *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen* (Ace).

Pournelle, Jerry, *The Mercenary* and *West of Honor* (Pocket Books). The two definitive novels about Pournelle's mercenary, John Christian Falkenberg.

Pratt, Fletcher, *The Well of the Unicorn* (Del Rey). War and intrigue in a well-developed fantasy world.

Russell, Eric Frank, *Wasp* (unabridged edition, Del Rey, 1986). A single Earthman's sabotage campaign shakes a whole alien planet.

Wells, H. G., *The War of the Worlds* and *The War in the Air*. The classic tale of alien invasion and an early depiction of "victory through air power."

Westheimer, David, *Lighter Than a Feather* (Little, Brown, 1971). What if the U.S. had invaded Japan in the fall of 1945? Outstanding characterization and use of multiple viewpoints.

White, James, *The Escape Orbit* (Ace). Human POW's improvise an escape from an alien prison planet. •



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MAX WEBER'S WAR

by Robert A. Frezza
art: Doug Chaffee

The author was born in 1956. He received a B.A. in history from Loyola College of Baltimore and a J.D. from the University of Maryland Law School. From there, he went on to serve as a captain in the Judge Advocate General's Corps. Having spent time as an officer in Germany, the author both saw and learned a lot about armored cavalry, which is the inspiration for this story.

Now living in Columbia, Maryland, the author works as a civilian attorney for the U.S. Army and devotes his creative energies to writing short stories and novels.

This is his first science-fiction story sale.

It was a damn fine shot, just above the turret ring at a little better than three klicks. It left a hole a man could stick his little finger through and three charred corpses. A few seconds later, a secondary explosion ripped the turret off and flung it away. Thompson, James J., O-2, 327-56-7147, methodically fired up three more targets of opportunity and edged Max backward down the slope before somebody returned the favor. A hit is outstanding at five meters or five k, but at three k, they shoot back.

Little tongues of flame outlined the nearest of the steel carcasses as the targets disappeared from view. There was a theory that occupants of a pierced vehicle lost eyes and eardrums to decompression and super-heated air a few milliseconds before the molten metal arrived to finish up. The question was whether there was time for anything to register. Thompson hoped that it would be a while before he found out.

By the time he hit bottom, main gun rounds were tearing the cover off the ridge. Dust and rocks rippled over Max's smooth metal hide. In designing Max, some anonymous genius had chosen a dumb shell with a very high muzzle velocity over a smart shell without. That was fine by Thompson.

It was Thompson's second hour of his first war.

Communications were shot to hell. Squadron was probably waving signal flags from church steeples. Assuming that there were still church steeples. Assuming that there was still a squadron.

The normal tanks hadn't lasted long.

Not merely a friend, J. D. Miles had been an officer who stood out, even in the armored cavalry. Thompson remembered J. D. on a gunnery



run at Graf with a jammed co-ax. J. D. had bounced out of the turret to engage troop targets with a saber. J. D. had gone off the net about an hour past dawn. He'd be missed.

Thompson let Max encipher a message. Max added call signs and tumbled frequencies to make it gibberish for the other side, unless the sequence of the day had been captured or sold, which it probably had. There was no response from squadron and probably no squadron to respond, nothing but jamming and static all along the band.

The battery they'd been spotting for had been wiped around 0430. Since then, the radio had been pretty quiet.

Thompson shrugged. There were more pressing matters, like staying alive and insuring that a few other people didn't. Covering a city that probably wasn't there. East of the Rhine are throw-away troops. A lot of them had burned.

Thompson visualized the command sergeant major spelling out "buy time" with Boy Scout semaphore flags. In combat, time was everything. That was Max's job, to create it. Max did, as efficiently as his little integrated circuits did everything else.

Thompson shrugged again. Enough extra time and he'd be talking to himself, or talking to Max which wasn't much better. He shook his head as far as the wire would permit and used some of it to improvise.

They'd started with one hell of an op plan. It had lasted maybe ten minutes, max. They'd have had a better job out of three captains and a quart of gin, or maybe one captain and three quarts of gin.

Thompson would have settled for the gin. It was a little late to explore the exciting career opportunities in the Alaska National Guard.

Thompson held his head rigid, letting his eyes glaze as the current came surging through the wire. He squirted signals to his tracks, alerting what was left of his trailing wedge to prepare to deploy.

No need to unbutton and wave. Just as well; the gas suits weren't good enough to fight in. Thompson had lost four scouts proving the point.

The wedge was a difficult formation to control. Thompson had to catch himself, to slow down and use all the words talking to the tracks. Max understood, but Max wasn't a spec four in an IFV with wax in his ears and between them. Max was pretty darn bright for a chunk of tin, and they surely didn't pay him enough.

Off to Thompson's right rear there was still smoke where Mike Dunn's tank was burning. Mike had throttled off a flank assault after Ray Swartko bought it. Thompson found himself telling his tank about Dunn's kids. Blushing. Thompson wondered what Jan would say.

Unperturbed by the indiscretion, Max read out confirmed and probable enemy dispositions, revising his set as new data crept in through his sensors. Thompson swung his shrunken formation on a heading of 211° to break

contact.

Max had telefactored, pinhole eyes buried in the skin with a constant 360° readout. Thompson moved his head at a ratio of two to one to see it himself. The feeling was weird. No man was meant to look back between his shoulder blades. Vertigo or a stiff neck, your choice.

Thompson gave himself a few more seconds and let himself believe that they'd broken off from the first wave. With luck, they'd stick around long enough to embarrass a second.

The mission hadn't changed over the years. A Cav captain pulling border duty in the seventies had said it all in the Bamberg O Club. "In front of the lead platoon of the first company of the first battalion of the first regiment of the first division of the first army of the leading front of the strategic direction are going to be two guys on motorcycles. My job is those two guys." Equipment had changed, though. Thompson ran his hand over Max's console. Maybe even the people.

The second wave would be larger. The third wave would be larger still, progressively, as in a branching sequence. Thompson grinned.

Branching sequences had a lot more to do with making Max the tank he was than a new gun or new armor. It meant that Thompson and Max the computer could run Max the tank mighty fine, and eliminating three crewmen made Max the tank a lot lower to the ground and meaner than any tank had a right to be. The link made it go. The wire, they called it, to wire computers to people.

An ultimate solution to command and control. Gun accuracy beyond belief. Something very new and radical in the very ancient profession of arms.

It had started with a dead end called a neurophone in the sixties. The neurophone was gone, but insulated mesh pads were around to feed electrical signals into the human nervous system, and biochip implants and optoelectrical circuits changed the way the brain organized what it had to work with.

It didn't take much of a genius to figure out that a smart man and a smart computer could do a lot more together than either could separately, once they managed to get around the problem of unequal transmission speed. How much more? On impulse, he asked Max for an approximation.

Max whispered numbers into his ear. Thompson laughed aloud. All that came from a couple of wafers the size of a man's fist.

Five hours of combat had erased most of Thompson's illusions. Max had kept him alive, so far. So far meant five hours longer than Thompson felt he had a right to expect.

Max acknowledged the compliment without interrupting the flow of data, a little touch of vanity written into his programs. Max was pretty sharp for a piece of tin. The wire wasn't perfect, though. In a group photo, the guys on the M9s were the ones letting their hair grow into crew cuts.

Max keyed Thompson's attention. Artillery rounds were passing overhead, from the wrong direction but far over. Fired by guess and by God.

Other images approached on a different vector.

Thompson reacted violently. Three hostile aircraft, fixed wing, were coming in high and fast. Thompson disseminated as he swung the cupola to engage the chain gun.

To his right Andy Anderssen's Robin beat him to the draw. A few seconds later, 40mm shells from the flaktrack lit the sky; so did the 25mm from the infantry fighting vehicles, though the IFV's couldn't lock and didn't have a snowball's chance of scoring.

The jets acted surprised. The first two got hit head-on and erupted. The third flew frantically overhead, attempting to lose altitude, and its wing came off in pieces. It hit the ground and cartwheeled.

They had come in twenty meters off the deck, far too high for business. They'd probably expected to be behind their own lines. Unnecessary assumptions were nasty things. More often than not, they got people killed.

For a second, something about the deal didn't factor. Three planes usually don't make a squadron. Survivors usually don't make dumb mistakes.

As if sensing Thompson's hesitation, Max offered a solution. One of the two IFV's was cracked open down to its bogie wheels. That was pretty fair for snap shooting. It was just as well there hadn't been more.

Thompson looked around, figuratively speaking. As Agatha Christie would say, and then there were four. He'd started with twenty-nine men and seven vehicles. He was down to the smallest combined arms team in Uncle Sammie's Army, although there were probably a couple of other people vying for the honor just now and some Russians trying to help.

He reformed his surviving vehicles into a loose diamond, placing Andy Anderssen on the right, the IFV on the left, the flak trailing. As they moved out, 25mm ammo lit the wreck of the IFV like a sparkler.

Thompson laid his ambush position where the forest ran into a barley field. Although it had a pretty good field of fire, it wasn't textbook. The textbook position was nine hundred meters away. It was already taking a pounding. The people on the other side were a lot of things, but they weren't stupid. They could read the book.

Thompson waited with his command under cover and enjoyed the light and laser show. Max could pick off targets on the move almost as easily as he could from a stationary position, but that didn't suit Thompson. Moving around in the open wasn't healthy. It was very unhealthy, in fact.

Thompson had Max take stock while they waited. Max obediently flashed results: forty-seven main gun rounds split almost evenly between Max and Andy's Robin, a little smoke, light stuff for the chain gun. All but nine high explosive rounds had been used up; most of what was left was armor-piercing.

The flaktrack with its twin forties was fairly flush. The IFV had a driver, a 25 mil gunner, three wire-guided missiles, and a two-man STINGER team. On the other side of the balance, there were lots and lots of Russians, maybe Czechs, maybe halfway to Nuernberg.

Max indicated a sudden flash on the horizon. Good trick that, sunrise east and west. The blast was too far away for immediate worry, though. So much for limited warfare.

For the sake of hearing himself talk, he told Max a good story about the Russkie squadrons chasing down cruise missiles. A pilot who catches a cruise missile is likely to have it go off in his face.

They were using married pilots with kids, stationed at home for motivation.

Jan was home with her parents, in the land of the big P.X. and round door-knobs. It was the best place she could be. The evacuation plan was probably screwed up beyond belief. In Bindlach, her chances would have been slim to none.

The two of them had never gotten around to having kids. First the Point, then the Cav, there had never seemed to be time. It didn't much look like there'd be any.

Max's great-granddaddy had been a teaching device for autistic children, of all things. Liberal arts types would gag on that trivia.

As Thompson was chattering away, Max picked out the leading elements of the second wave, advancing cautiously under smoke behind schedule. Thompson had Max give Andy's Robin the go-ahead, and the two of them belched out six rounds apiece before displacing into the trees ahead of the return fire.

They had eleven hits and maybe nine kills for twelve shells expended. Andy Anderssen was expressing himself freely.

Thompson smiled again. Andy never started cussing until his fourth miss and never indulged himself over an open line. Well, it was real now. The opposing battalion commander would be doing more than that if he hadn't been riding the third vehicle. It was time to move before things got hot.

Armored warfare was more antiseptic than Thompson had imagined. Push a button. Half a mile away, crispy critters got cooked up in a band-aid box, tidy and neat. Shooting up the old T-72s was like potting ducks. They didn't have the armor to stay and play, they didn't have the gun to return fire. The newer stuff was a different kettle of fish entirely. But then, so was Max.

He'd christened Max after the twentieth-century sociologist who had enlivened a plebe year course in Fundamentals and Dynamics of Leadership about as much as that course could have been enlivened. He'd wanted to name the tank Jan. The original was still smarting over that, and other things besides. Sometimes Thompson envied Andy Anderssen, who hadn't stayed married to anyone long enough for anyone to give a damn what he

called his tank. The half Cav was a fun bunch to serve with, but the divorces were something else.

The kaserne was too small, too isolated. The mission was the border. Everyone spent too much time patrolling the border or on the ranges at Graf. The stress killed marriages as much as anything. For Jan, Max had merely been one straw too many.

He found himself explaining. Max understood. It abruptly occurred to Thompson that if you talked to your tank enough, your tank would start answering back. He shrugged. As the sergeant major would say, "Crack up on your own time, Lieutenant."

He let Max pick his way around a small village, one of the farm communities scattered from one end of Bavaria to the other. He would have liked to have positioned inside, but fields of fire were too restricted, with too many approaches to cover, no good line of retreat. Max agreed.

Behind the broken facades in the village, there was no movement. Anyone not fled or dead was sensibly lying very low. The other possibility was biologicals, or gas.

Thompson led his abridged platoon past dead chickens and a torn-up BMW, heading roughly southwest.

The coffee was cold and bad. Thompson shoved it into the little microwave to heat and considered investing in an IV so it wouldn't have to go past his tongue. Thompson actually just wanted a couple of mouthfuls; plumbing arrangements on an armored vehicle left a lot to be desired.

With all the shielding the little oven had, it could have done duty as a safe. Max still "disliked" it; although it didn't actually degrade data, the shielding wasn't as perfect as the manufacturer claimed. Max was full of little surprises.

Thompson sipped his coffee and tried to think of something else worth talking about. Thompson had his vehicles spread to hold position on a low rise beyond where the road angled, and it looked as if they might be there a while.

During exercises, bleeding off time hadn't been much of a problem. The test team had been wary of letting the M9s operate more than a few hours at a time, so the exercises had been packed with everything that could be squeezed in and a little more.

On the other hand, war was turning out to be a lot of boredom punctuated by a little stark terror, with Max and the biochip to make it last longer like an alkaline battery. The wire augmented the thinking process somehow. Even a short wait seemed to last forever.

Andy interrupted forever. A single vehicle was approaching, with everybody else on the other side out of sight. Everybody else was learning caution. Thompson gulped his coffee and jammed the plastic cup into its holder. He thought for a second and decided to wait and see if everybody

else would stick noses into the kill zone prematurely.

Andy Anderssen was worth his weight in gold, especially after Ray Swartko folded. Andy had been on the M9s the longest, and if Thompson talked to his tank occasionally, Andy really didn't talk to anything or anybody else.

Robin gave results, though. Andy had once had her put a round through the bottom of a bucket at four kilometers to impress a visiting general, the one who'd "brought bayonet training into the twenty-first century." The general must have thought they faked it.

Thompson had met him. The general would have been lucky to distinguish a capacitor from a mouse trap three times running.

It was the general's kind of war, a silly one assuming that there was another kind. Nothing about it made sense. During those first few minutes, Andy was the only one who had really hadn't thought it was a drill. Thompson honestly couldn't even remember getting out of bed and hooking up with Max.

Maybe the Russians had expected everybody to roll over and play dead. Enough people had talked about that over the years so that maybe the Russians had an excuse for getting their wires crossed. Maybe somebody trying to grab reins in Moscow had talked himself in a bind.

Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. The real Max Weber had explained how bureaucracies function. Max had died right after the First World War, before he'd finished explaining how they broke down.

Thompson watched the sacrificial lamb begin to climb. None of the other fish were biting. The IFV was poised to take it out with the curve of the rise to mask the missile's signature. Thompson let his scouts take it and began moving everyone else back. As he expected, immediately after the Lone Ranger blew, self-propelled mortars concealed on a reverse slope began pounding the rise, more or less at random.

A freak overshoot dropped one of the big mortar rounds on top of the STINGER team before it could be picked up.

Thompson grimaced. He had Max fire up BMPs for lack of better targets and pulled out quickly. Andy covered, hitting his grenade launchers for smoke and white phosphorus. *Nacht und Nebel*, night and fog, they called it, especially around those Bundesdeutschers old enough to comprehend the gallows humor.

Max was still waiting for a response to knight to queen's knight six. Thompson swore softly and resigned. Cross-country movement took too much concentration, and Max never got suckered the same way twice.

There was a worn jingle: if you can be seen, you can be hit; if you can be hit, you can be killed; and that can ruin your whole day, your whole week, even. The Russians were getting more cautious by the minute. The BMPs sent out to get scrapped had been pulling reconnaissance the hard way.

Thompson wanted to know why, and he suspected that he wouldn't like the answer.

"Eleven hundred meters, Max," he whispered softly, "then we try again. Anything look like a fall-back position to you?"

Max was programmed to respond. His selection was ludicrous, but Max was formulating criteria and branching. His next selection probably wouldn't be.

Always assuming there was a next selection. Thompson had his people spread wide, but traveling eleven hundred meters in the open fields took a long time, maybe a lifetime.

The tracks really clawed up furrows. Thompson watched the landscape flow by at controlled speed, looking for Bavarian farmers with pitchforks and hoping he hadn't cut his margin of safety too fine.

Fine and too fine, at four hundred meters four choppers, tank busters, popped from dead ground and let fly. Andy had that sector wired. He took out one helicopter directly with a main gun HE round proximity fused; the tapered bore 140mm/120mms were hellishly accurate under computer direction. It wasn't enough.

Max put a flechette round spinning through one rocket cluster like a buzz saw, too little, too late. With the rocket pods, there were too many projectiles to dodge. The smarter bombs were concealed from counterfire by the other flying junk. The flaktrack clawed a second chopper out of the sky and disintegrated. "Lord, we who are about to receive . . ." Thompson began, as the ground around him exploded. Max shuddered under the impact and spun off a track.

Surviving choppers discreetly withdrew. The reprieve would be brief. Minus a track, Max wasn't going anywhere fast. With his remaining eyes, Thompson watched Andy move away from the blazing hulk of the flak chassis in silence, the little IFV obediently waddling behind.

There was a lull and a silence. Thompson heard the wind beat against the side of the tank. He decided to use up a few options and fired off what was left of his smoke, both to screen his position and to simulate a fire. Then he sat back. The choppers appeared again over his left shoulder. Max's gun was facing the wrong way. Thompson was content to play possum.

They ducked down without firing. Between the stuff Max was kicking out and the dust storms, they probably couldn't see to shoot. Thompson slapped Max's console softly.

The terrain had really taken a beating. The wind had sprung up out of the west around sunrise. It was starting to pick up.

In a novel he'd once read, windstorms had carried radioactive rain all over the world, killing everything off. Thompson decided that the novel was crap. The way things were out there, a breeze couldn't move half a klick in a straight line. Most of the nuclear winter stuff was garbage, too. Compared

to what a good-sized volcano could lay out, even A-bombs couldn't compete.

It was funny, everybody on the M9s seemed to read an awful lot.

Based on Max's latest plot, Thompson figured he had perhaps seven minutes before the covering force took position hull-down on the rise they'd vacated; Russians have a passion for high ground. The maneuver element would then gingerly pick its way through the fields, but Thompson didn't intend to wait for them to join the party. Still, seven minutes meant plenty of time to chat.

If a computer can truly be said to "like" or "dislike" something, Max disliked leaving Robin alone. It quartered her chance of survival and mission accomplishment. Despite their predicament, Thompson was amused by the thought of zero quartered. He was even more amused by the fact that Max had discounted the presence of Williams and Cotto in the IFV in defining "alone" for the purpose of the equation.

It was fun talking to Max. The wire was addictive. Unhooking was like being wrapped in cotton. It made it harder to talk to people.

More than anything, that was what had gotten Jan. Her flight had gone out of Frankfurt, and that had been that.

It wasn't as if they had despised each other. It wasn't as if she'd been sleeping around or hitting the bottle the way some wives did. Jan was different. She'd just wanted the time to herself to make the adjustment.

Every war has casualties. Some of them even happen in peacetime. Not all of them bleed.

Thompson cleaned that part of the past out of his memory. He wasted a few minutes playing math games to keep Max amused. He paused again to reflect.

He understood. He's changed. Maybe she had, too, in a way. Max knew. People get squeezed apart. Humpty-Dumpty didn't always get put back together again.

It was easier to see now. Combat stripped away evasions. It speeded things up, burned away the dross.

He'd written a few times. He'd thought maybe he'd patched it up. Now, that was over, along with everything else. In a way, Thompson was glad. Suddenly, there didn't seem to be anything left to say.

Max kicked him back into action. The covering force was arriving, T-80s, a full company, deploying in threes. Thompson gave them just enough time to settle and turned Max loose; there was no point in conserving ammo.

A T-80 couldn't depress its barrel worth a damn, and even hull-down it exposed itself. Max took advantage of that design characteristic, spacing shots.

Whoever ran that company knew his business. Max lurched twice under direct hits. The instrument panels started running wild. Shooting downhill didn't throw them nearly as much as Thompson had hoped, and the deflection angle made it impossible to shield the thin skin on top. From the

panel, Thompson could see little fires starting from sparks thrown off by newly exposed wires. A quick check of the board showed massive damage.

A third shell tore through the armor on the left rear quarter and blew the engine compartment into scrap. Thompson stripped off the headset with a good piece of his scalp. If Max went down while he was wired, his mind would get scrubbed out with steel wool. The mental fog settled in. Thompson went back to being deaf, dumb, and blind.

Main power had gone on the first hit. The rest had taken out the electrical system, cut the hydraulic lines, and started a big blaze in back. The cubby-hole in the turret that was the crew compartment hadn't come through entirely unscathed. Feeling was gone from Thompson's lower spine, flying metal from the hoist, maybe.

The hull rocked under another hit and another near-miss. Survivors up on the rise were still rattled pretty well.

The big, open crew space in a normal tank would have been trashed through and through. Thompson was lucky, if someone wanted to call it luck.

No point in bailing out. There weren't any medevacs left. Even if there were, it wouldn't be worth the fuel if they were triaging patients at the door.

Thompson caressed the breach of the gun. No ammo and no hoist. No Max to lay the gun. The numbness was creeping into his legs, not that that mattered; the gas seal wasn't tight, and Max wasn't filtering. If a smashed spine didn't do the job, the stuff outside would.

Thompson decided that it was time to lay back and call it a day.

Thompson had once tried very hard to get his parents to move. Apart from launcher sites, Aberdeen-Edgewood and Fort Detrick were two of the spots in the U.S. voted most likely to get nuked, Detrick especially. The Russians were horribly afraid of biologicals. They knew their own. With Meade, D.C., and Baltimore as secondary targets, central Maryland would get it in the neck no matter which way the wind was blowing. Thompson tried to calculate how long he'd been an orphan. The numbers kept slipping out of his mind without Max to help.

Off the wire, things happened quickly. Hell had broken loose about 0132. His watch had stopped at 0721. So much for three generations of Timex commercials. Thompson figured that at least he wouldn't be sitting around waiting to die for forty or fifty years the way some people did.

Judging from the sounds filtering in from outside, somebody had elected to hold off and pound the area with artillery. Thompson's professional dignity was outraged. Good men had died for the opportunity the idiot was throwing away with both hands.

After a few more seconds passed, Thompson's eyes finally adjusted to the darkness. From what was left on the panel, he could see that there was nothing left in the memory core. He wept.

After half a minute or so, he began getting dizzy. He wanted to ask Jan about it, but she kept slipping away.

The artillery fire stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The wind began picking up outside the tank. The dust storms were getting worse. Thompson couldn't think why. He asked Max. Max was gold-bricking; Max wouldn't say.

Anderssen covered the movement of the remaining IFV, whistling "Garryowen" tunelessly. Robin joined in, pulling him on key.

He tried to pick out a firing position. His orders were to destroy M9 technology. He'd been around long enough not to need it's crossed.

"They shoot horses, don't they?" he asked Robin. Max was more than a horse, though. To Anderssen's way of thinking, Max was more than most people.

Robin whispered patiently, upgrading the data they had to work with. Max and the lieutenant were special; they'd be missed. Robin agreed. Anderssen wondered whether anyone would be around to do him the same favor when his turn came.

Three or four dust clouds were sweeping across the landscape. Looking up at the sky through Robin's peripherals, Anderssen couldn't decide whether it would rain or not. The clouds were all screwed up.

Anderssen let his eyes wander over the broken landscape. In one of those half-thoughts on the edge of consciousness, it occurred to him that it would be a while before the grass grew where the storms set their mark. Talking to Robin, he let his mind run on in choppy patterns.

"Third wave's almost due. CAT'll give the flyboys fits. Not a bad place to dismount some infantry. Wish I had some. Wish it was the Max Weber back there instead of the scout. See the little house there, broken eyes like windows. Cold winter coming. MREs for dinner. Glad I won't have to eat the damn things."

"What's up, Doc?"

The tall man wearing lieutenant-colonel's leaves whirled his chair around. "Oh, it's you, Charlie. I didn't hear you come in. I didn't expect to see you until Friday." He stood up from his console and stretched. "That wasn't very funny."

"Sorry, John. Didn't mean to be flippant. How're the wife and kids?"

"Molly's fine. She likes this assignment, and to tell the truth, I do, too." He shrugged. "My eldest is in braces, and to hear her talk, you'd think she'll never get a date. I'd show you some pictures, but I'm pretty sure you had a better reason to come down early."

"I came down to snoop a little, John." The crossed rifles of the infantry sparkled on his collar as he looked down through the plate glass away from the hot El Paso sun to watch the nearest of four massive simulators rock and

spin on its hydraulics. "We're taking fire from both sides on the whole M9 program, not to mention this little project of yours. More number-crunching for four guys than I ever expected to see in my life."

"Four guys and four computers — don't forget them. Baptist preachers are afraid that self-programming computers are going to take over the world, and OMB is afraid they won't," his counterpart replied. "I wouldn't worry, Charlie. Everything went off better than expected. Anderssen, Thompson, and Dunn are go, right off the scale. Swartko's a wash, though. Overall, the unit's dynamite."

"I knew Jim Thompson in Fuerth. In fact, I'm the one who picked his platoon. He's a good one."

"Good?" The engineer wearing the silver oak leaves snorted. "He thinks he's Erwin Rommel and John Wayne, and I'm not going to try to tell him he's wrong."

"I saw him coming out of the building on a stretcher. How is he?" the infantryman asked quietly.

"He'll be fine. Just between you and me, we let him go too long. The M.D. was supposed to dope him before I pulled the plug on the Max Weber, but he got itchy and wasted most of his hypospray on Thompson's belt." He shook his head ruefully. "Real mess. We had to override the locking sequence with a chisel. Thompson tore up his scalp a little, but I'll have him and his electronic buddy on a plane back to Germany in a week to stick back in the saddle." He bobbed his head toward the plate glass.

"Anderssen's still going, he must be throwing rocks by now. They shot up the best part of two regiments. Did I tell you that we had this set as a double blind? Newt and some of his people came down from the Armor School to push Russian platoons and companies. They're still trying to figure out what they hit. I'll get you a copy of the back-up tapes. There's a couple of people in the Sec Def's office that I'll want you to feed some crow to."

The infantryman nodded with his nose pressed against the glass. "Love to." He watched the big simulator ripple in the semblance of forward movement and settle. "It's real in there, isn't it?" he added softly.

"Charlie, you did two tours in the Pentagon, and you're going to ask me if something's real?" the engineer asked caustically. "It's real, Charlie. It's just the peripherals are all mine."

He searched for an analogy. "If I tell you my foot itches and you say it's amputated at the knee, well as far as I'm concerned that itch is as real as real can be. That other hotshot your boss sent down took a test ride and didn't buckle in. We rattled him like a pea, and he swore up, down, and sideways that he was riding around the building at sixty miles per."

"Smart Yankee. You know what I'm talking about." The infantryman sat down at the panel and picked up the coffee cup Thompson had used. "It was a dirty business to set them up cold."

"Charlie, we need this if we're going to keep the M9s."

"I know that. I don't have to like it, and I know you well enough to know that you like it even less than I do. You never could play poker worth a damn. Swartko or Thompson?"

The engineer sighed. "Swartko mostly. He really went to pieces." He ran fingers through his thinning hair. "He's going to be seeing snakes under his bed for the rest of his life."

The infantryman spoke softly, his voice muffled by the sound baffles. "John, this is just me speaking, but I'm not half as worried about the one that flunked as I am about the three that passed. I picked Jim Thompson, I said. He used to be an extrovert with a pretty wife, a real nice kid." He thought about what he wanted to say.

"Most wars, we send Jim Thompsons out, they fight. They live more intensely then they'll ever live in their lives. They get closer to a couple of guys than they'll ever get to their wives. They bring that away forever." He pointed.

"You've got a war inside that box of yours. Only the other guy's a wafer chip."

"What? Oh, sorry, Robin girl. Forgot again. Got to quit swearing. I keep forgetting you're a lady, not some hooker."

Anderssen figured that one round would touch off whatever was left of the fuel. He picked a spot where the Max Weber's armor was shredded and let Robin take it. Robin corrected for wind, temperature, and air pressure. With one round, she blew what was left of the Max Weber from her screen.

Anderssen let his face harden and signaled for the scout to scoot. "Well, honey, no point in our delaying the inevitable much longer," he whispered.

As they waited, rays of sunlight stripped away the last of the evening mist, and the whirlwinds danced. While Thompson, James J., O-2, 327-56-7147, slumbered in a narcotic haze in the world outside, Robin serenely plotted trajectories in the twilight of the first and last day of Max Weber's war. ☀

Kleinisms

You never see anything but the outside of a body.

A safety device is safe . . . as long as people do not depend on it.

If all else fails, go back to Newton!

— Professor Arthur L. Klein (1898-1983)

ON

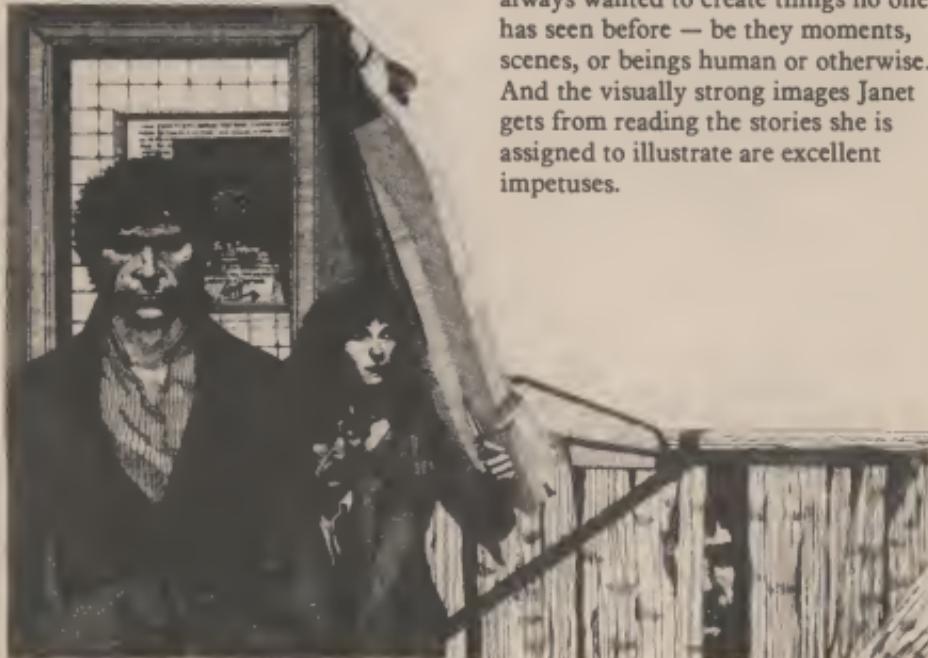
Exhibit

Janet Aulisio

Janet Aulisio studied two years at both the New York Phoenix School of Design and the Ridgewood School of Art, where she learned to sharpen her skills at drawing both figures and backgrounds. She works primarily in black and white because she believes that there is a richness and clarity inherent in such artwork. "I compare

it to an overcast day versus a sunny day," claims Janet. "On a sunny day, I have to contend with brightness in color to the point of dazzle, whereas with an overcast day there is more focus, more definition." As her technique has developed, she has added more line to her artwork with the stipple to create more solidarity and form. As she adds more line, cross-hatch, and stipple, she compares her black-and-white technique to sculpture in terms of depth and light.

Janet was drawn to the science-fiction art field because of her vivid imagination. Simply put, she has always wanted to create things no one has seen before — be they moments, scenes, or beings human or otherwise. And the visually strong images Janet gets from reading the stories she is assigned to illustrate are excellent impetuses.



"Touch of the Match," 1985

"Storming the Cosmos," 1985





"The Wire around the World," 1985

"Manna from Heaven," 1985



"In the Realm of the Heart," 1985

Several years ago, Janet's artwork was exhibited at the American Cultural Center in Paris, France, for an art show that focused on American science-fiction art. Her works were shown alongside those of Richard Powers, Mike Hinge, and Ron Walotsky.

Those who are interested in finding out more about Janet's artwork can contact her here at TSR, Inc. Write to: Janet Aulisio, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

TEMPLE TO A MINOR GODDESS

by Susan Shwartz
art: George Barr



Write about what you know: Susan Shwartz does know the academic life, though she presently works in an investment firm. (We anxiously wait to discover how the latter might enter the realms of fantasy.)

She has edited several anthologies of SF and fantasy; her stories have appeared in various publications; a fantasy novel about the ancient Silk Roads is to appear from Tor Books.

The present story is a tribute to Jane Yolen, whose house faces the original of the "temple."

"Corner of Oak and Appian," Jane Stemple, chairman of the Classics Department had told him, "right across the road from the temple to a minor goddess. You can't miss it. No, you'll understand when you get there. Dinner's at seven."

David Barres scrutinized himself in the small mirror with the care he might have given a newly turned-up Virgil fragment. For Cambridge (Massachusetts or Great Britain) his clothes were fine, or for New York. For western Massachusetts and a small town, he wasn't so certain. Never before had he observed the WASP in its native habitat. He straightened his rep tie again.

Twenty years ago he'd scuffled out of the Bronx and into Columbia, where he'd worked two jobs to support his sudden, inexplicable addiction to Greek and Latin. Street smarts thrust him effortlessly through the grad-school morass of warring professors, too-small fellowships, and student rivalries. He'd survived the years of precarious, untenured posts while he published; won the necessary Fulbright, working toward security some day with the same devotion that his brother lavished on his CPA and his high-school best friend kept for his rebuilt car. Back in the Bronx, not too many understood what or why he wanted to be a Classics professor. Not only wasn't he a priest, he wasn't even Catholic! It didn't make sense. Still, they had to admire the survivor in him.

He hoped the people here in Hatfield did too. It was time to stop scrapping and start settling down. When the John H. Finley Chair at this rich, sleepy university fell vacant and he was offered a year as a visiting scholar, he grabbed it, knowing what it meant.

Endowed professorships weren't won by smarts or even by sustained, outstanding research. They were a gentlemen's club. In the past decades, some women like Jane Stemple had been allowed to join too. But the rule was still the same, simple and inexorable. Fit in, or forget it — though no academic would dream of being so blunt.

The chairman's dinner party in his honor was the first in a series of ordeals. The New Yorker in him would almost have preferred the subways at midnight. Would he fit in? Could the rest of the department — not to mention spouses and friends — stand to live with him the rest of his life?

And did he really want this? Sweet-talking faculty over cheap sherry, currying favor with balding deans — give him Fort Apache or, better yet, the ringing plains of windy Troy. There were times, after department meetings, when he envied the heroes out of epics who'd died quick and clean, not talked to death. Then he would think of the university's library, and his study with its old leather chairs, piled with tattered books, his desk full of notes that were ripening astonishingly past wit and insight into the beginnings of wisdom. There were the drafts of his translation of the *Aeneid*, which a chair like the John Finley one would enable him to finish — and get published. Like Aeneas, he had given up everything in a crazy quest; and

now he very badly wanted a home.

Picking up the bottle he'd bought in New York at Sherry Lehman for state dinner parties, he studied the label approvingly and raised the bottle in a wry, dry toast to his reflection. "Return with your shield — or on it," he muttered at the nervous face in the mirror, and turned to go.

Professor Stemple — and he really must get used to calling her Jane — hadn't been teasing him with her directions. Across from her rambling farmhouse was the "temple to a minor goddess," a splendid Greek-revival almost-farmhouse, set back from the road. Above its wooden Doric capitals, it even had a small, triangular window like the eye on occult renderings of the pyramids. The oaks that gave Oak Street its reputation blazed like hearthfires in the cozy glory of a New England autumn. Some temple indeed! Chuckling, he parked his venerable VW, leaving it unlocked for the first time in years. As he crossed the road, he found himself walking to the Stemples' with a tall woman at his side.

"You must be Professor Barres," she said. "I imagine that Jane's already told you that her house is right across the way from the temple to a minor goddess?"

"Does everyone around here call it that?" David asked. There were so many hidden jokes and customs he would have to learn!

"I don't. I call it the old Cantwell place. But then I'm Hester Cantwell, and I live there. Always have."

Cantwell. Cantwells had lived in Hatfield since the Revolution, if not earlier. This Hester Cantwell seemed to be in her mid-forties, about his own age. So it must have been her father Winthrop Cantwell who had been chairman, then provost. David had read his *Myth and Matriarchy* and *Latium Revealed* when he was still a sophomore. They were the first books he'd read that made him realize that not all writing had a market value or bottom line. Cantwell meant every word.

"There you are!" Jane Stemple's robust voice broke in on his reverie. She clumped down the weathered porch steps to greet them. She smiled at Hester Cantwell with such warmth that David pegged them as close friends. This Ms. Cantwell had to be one of those formidable ladies who were as influential in the world of small university towns as the deans or the provost.

She led them over to a casual array of drinks before she accepted David's package. She opened the bag and frowned minutely, then smiled so quickly that he almost missed her concern. He had brought only one bottle, not enough to go around. And the Chateau Margaux was too ostentatious, he realized with a pang. Forgivable on Fire Island, perhaps, but a grave extravagance here. Suddenly David's clothes felt wrong, the back of his neck pulsed with heat, and he was afraid to open his mouth in case street-punk accents blurred out to his ruin.

"I'll just put this in to chill . . ." began Jane, when Hester Cantwell smiled.

"Did you drive down with this today?" she asked David. Not waiting for a reply, she went on smoothly. "If he did, then this bottle's been shaken. Jane, you really should let it settle before you drink it. You'll just have to invite Professor Barres back."

The sweat under David's collar dried and he suppressed an urge to squirm with relief. As he listened to Jane Stemple and her large, bearded husband tease his guardian angel for reading Lord Peter Wimsey — and to think she was actually town librarian, with low tastes like that! — he glanced up at the sky. A dreary New England rain had threatened all day. But now, for the last hour before it set, the sun blazed low in the sky, turning the heavy clouds pale. Slate shadows rolled over the deep green grass and gravelled drive.

"So you like murder mysteries," he asked Hester Cantwell later over coffee as they sat on battered chairs in Jane Stemple's untidy garden, which seemed miraculously free of insects.

"I like the mysteries," she said. "Not the murders." She rose and took her cup indoors, murmuring that Jane had never, never understood how to use the fireplace here. Shortly afterwards, the mosquitoes joined the party, and David headed for the living room. The academic inquisition had already begun. To his surprise, Hester Cantwell joined in the shop talk as an equal.

"I've never been to Rome or Athens," she admitted with a smile. "And now — I'm afraid I'd be like the old professor who didn't get there till he was sixty, and then was shocked that the buildings were ruins."

He found himself talking to a weathered, slow-spoken man who looked like a farmer. That he was; but he was also the printer whose books David had collected for years. More than once, one book had meant a week of tuna and macaroni casseroles endured gladly. How would his translation look, painstakingly bound in rich leather, carefully arrayed on the thick paper that was this man's stock in trade, illustrated — perhaps — by the noted artist who sprawled with his tie askew on a battered corner sofa?

Jane Stemple joined the discussion on translations. "A good new version of the *Aeneid*," she looked up from her brandy. "That's the work of a lifetime." She awarded David one level glance.

A lifetime's work, and he had just one year on campus to make good. For a moment he wished that the oaks, oracles, or Kindly Ones were more than lovely myths so he could pray to them.

"You'll grow moss in three months," his old roommate had prophesied. "Within six, well, within six months, David, you'll beg to be allowed back into Manhattan." The same regularly sent him CARE packages from New York delis and had sent him off to Massachusetts with a gruesome array of Stephen King and Peter Straub titles: homicide, nausea, and the uncanny in

New England. But as winter swept autumn away under a white rug of snow, David realized that his friend was wrong. He was fitting in. He could tell — not just the fact that dinner party followed dinner party, and that the Stemples had invited him back to share the wine he'd brought and made the invitation sound genuine. It was other things — more casual and therefore, in Hatfield's scheme of things, much more important. The department secretary scrounged him his own electric kettle for afternoon tea. Faculty wives introduced him to their children; the husbands of female colleagues called him by his first name and offered to teach him cross-country skiing.

After the years of promise, of too-facile brilliance, his work was maturing. The harvest of articles, of books, would be nothing short of splendid, he thought in euphoric, midnight moments. His paper at the annual American Philological Association meeting was received with appreciative mutters and requests for offprints. Junior faculty besieged him with questions. He sensed that, for the first time in their lives, they were more interested in his subject than in scoring points by demonstrating in public where his ignorance began.

Afterwards a woman came up to him and invited him to join her and her much-in-evidence fiancé for dinner. David was embarrassed. Years before, when they had both been untenured assistants at the same mid-western university, there had been . . . "Least said, soonest mended," he remembered a proverb he had heard Hester Cantwell quote once. Too much had been said, on both sides. He still cringed over his old lover's last diatribe. "You've got two people inside you, David. One is a gentleman and a gentle man — as well as one Hell of a fine scholar. The other is a sleaze. It's the sleaze I can't stand."

Because he saw no way to turn down the dinner invitation, David went. To his amazement, he found himself enjoying it. Jan had always had a wicked sense of humor.

"You like Hatfield?" she asked, when dinner had given way to afterdinner drinks and even confidences. "I suppose by now you've met all the locals. There's a woman named Cantwell, old Winthrop Cantwell's daughter. She and Stemple roomed together at Smith. Everyone wondered why Hester Cantwell didn't go on, too; but I suppose she simply didn't want to leave home to do research. Her family's been rooted in Hatfield for three hundred years now."

David had poured more brandy and turned the subject.

Please let them keep me. That became his litany as he shovelled snow or marked exams, hiked with new friends, or advised students. A sleaze would have tried to get an angle on the department; a scholar would study it. Being both, of course, David tried both. And ultimately, that led him back to the Cantwell Public Library.

One of his graduate students — who had grown up in Hatfield and

returned there after college — tramped into David's study. He had a sack of birdseed tucked into his bookbag. For the feeder at the library, he explained, almost in surprise that an explanation was needed. He offered to show David.

The yellow brick building with its false pillars was small, almost cramped. It looked like some Roman outpost in the middle of the snow. The young man emptied the seed into a homemade feeder for the nuthatches. "Sometimes, at night, we get deer too," he told David enthusiastically. Then he started up the steep flight of stairs into a high-ceilinged room of pegged and narrow-boarded, polished floors, inadequate heat, and the dusty smell of aged books.

At long, battered tables sat children. Several were cutting paper; most were reading. One or two sorted through three boxes labelled LOST, FOUND, and LOANED. An electric fireplace which had to be contraband in any library beckoned to David. Beside it, in a basket, dozed two large, equally-contraband ginger cats. One old man slumped across a desk in a dark corner; three ladies well along in their seventies sat knitting. As David watched, one of them bound off her knitting, rose, took the finished scarf, and deposited it in the box marked LOANED.

David's advisee nodded at Hester Cantwell, who sat tranquilly reading. She laid a leather bookmark at her place and rose to greet them, her steps long and unhurried.

"We're almost done with the tags, Ms. Cantwell," a dark-haired boy called out softly.

She glanced at the sample he held up and nodded. "If the tag sale earns enough for a hot plate, I'll supply hot chocolate and bake cookies all winter."

She shook hands with David's student and smiled at David too. "Have you explained this to Professor Barres yet?"

"About how you run a school here? I thought you would want to. I just came by to drop off some seed, the usual stuff."

David tried not to look desperately curious, but failed.

"Of course all of this is . . . highly contrary to rules," she smiled. "No pets, no food, and certainly no electric heater in public libraries . . . though I suspect there's a kettle or two for coffee in the university's library, isn't there? And then there's the knitting."

Easy enough, David thought, when your family practically owns the place. He remembered the librarian who first befriended him, and how she had been plagued by rules, inadequate funding, and the need to keep order until, one day, he'd come in asking for her and been told that Miss Jakubik no longer worked here. *Burn-out*, he thought. He stared at the children with sympathy and envy, remembering.

"I see you have a LOST and FOUND. What's the LOANED box for?"

"That's simple. Some of the children hereabouts, like the Grenier boy I just spoke to, don't have all that much money. Plus, they seem to spend their

lunch money on books, or videogames; I don't ask questions. If I bring a hot plate in, I'll know they're eating. And if they don't have gloves or a hat, the LOANED box lets them take what they need without feeling beholden. And, just incidentally, it helps the ladies who knit for it feel valuable, instead of as if they're simply taking up space here . . . or anywhere. But, . . ." her long face lit and she smiled again, almost mischievously. "Shhhh. I have to obey the rules too."

David drifted about the library, studying the large, yellowing woodcuts of the Colosseum and Vesuvius, searching for what he realized he'd find here: town archives, family papers, letters. He should have thought of this earlier!

The town's original charter held his attention. At most libraries, the elegantly-written seventeenth-century document would have been kept under glass or under lock and key. Maps, treaties with the local Indians . . . one of the signatories was a Cantwell. Letters, a Latin journal kept by one Benjamin Cantwell, husband of Demeter, father of Phoebe and Hester, for whom the librarian in this time and place was probably named. He smiled to himself. Old Benjamin certainly had a classical bent.

"Studying us?" Hester's quiet voice made him jump. "I thought your specialty was Virgil."

He flushed, then relaxed. There was no reproach in her voice. "Virgil: no doubt about it. But the way your family and the other early settlers came over here to find a home . . . there are similarities."

"With the *Aeneid*, or with your own family?"

My family came much, much later, thought David. "Both," he said aloud.

"*Fato profugus*," she quoted. "Driven by Fate. We have that in common. Perhaps you might wish to see others of my family's records. I keep them at home. Shall we say at six, tomorrow evening?"

The news of Hester's dinner invitation rippled across lunch tables in the placid Classics department and started side-eddies among the medieval historians, who smiled, and the modernists, who gossiped. One man even dared a bit of inappropriate back-slapping. A Marxist. David suspected that his contract might not be renewed; obviously, he wasn't congenial, bright though he was.

Jane Stemple's only comment was a Delphic, "Hester Cantwell is one of my dearest friends."

She was one of everyone's dearest friends, David thought. But no one's mother, no one's wife. He wondered why she had never married, why she had never pursued a scholarly career. Then he simply wondered about her. Why had she invited him to dinner, when simply inviting him over for tea and an afternoon of research would have been perfectly gracious and perfectly sufficient?

David himself had never married, never even come close. The women he knew best had either been academic rivals or the sort of lightweights his less savvy friends married in graduate school and then, tragically, outgrew. He

had a sudden, agonizingly welcome vision of John Finley Professor David Barres and his wife, Hester Cantwell Barres. Then, resolutely, he pushed it to the back of his mind. He was not Aeneas, nor was meant to be; and Hatfield was not Latium. For that matter, it wasn't his — and neither was the Finley chair.

Besides, Hester Cantwell clearly had a will of her own.

Promptly at six, he presented himself at the temple to a minor goddess. Hester drew him inside the old house for the first time. Its hallway was sparsely furnished with faded Persian rugs and shining old tables with brass ornaments. Then she ushered him into a sitting room where pewter shone on the mantel and a fire burned merrily against andirons that looked like they had been polished by generations of earnest Puritans.

"Bread, honey, and sea salt," he told Hester, holding out a package. "A friend back in New York thinks we starve out here."

She opened the package, smiling delightedly. David remembered his old, ridiculously extravagant gift of wine.

"My own family has a custom . . ." he began hesitantly.

"Bread and salt for a housewarming? Or apples and honey for a sweet year. I have some apples, if you'd like to share that. Thank you, David. I'm glad you thought to share your friend's gift." She smiled warmly, then poured sherry.

Careful, boy, he told himself.

Throughout dinner, he was aware that he was gawking at her like the most callow of freshmen. Why had she decided to befriend him? Of course, that made him hope — *she's adopted the kids in her library too, Barres, and don't forget the old ladies, and those stray cats. It's her nature to take in strays.*

He had a sudden, dizzying vision of generations of Cantwell women with their classical names, all living quietly in this town, helping their neighbors without letting them feel "beholden," that fine, expressive New England word.

What's the angle? the punk in him rose up and asked, and was strictly suppressed. She *had* no angle. David had never dreamed of making it to a place where there were no angles. Longing, nostalgia for a place he had no claim on, possessed him; and he had to ask his hostess to repeat her last remark.

"I was asking if Jane ever told you of the time she was outside Thebes, digging in a temple of the Cabiroi? Apparently, as she always says, she did something to upset the little earth-spirits, and a pack of wild dogs chased her team back to their camp. They barely had time to stow the senior faculty in a station wagon."

"Rather reprehensible of the Cabiroi — or foolhardy, wouldn't you say? They must not have known Jane."

"Simply impolite," she said, dead-pan. "They should have known Jane

wouldn't dream of offending them."

He would never outgrow this woman, would never want to. They could grow old together, her composure and humor like a hearthfire or a beacon to guard him from his sleazy shadow-self, to help him protect himself in the academic struggles for prestige. There was no longer any thrill in locking horns with younger scholars. These days, he reminded himself of the kings in Diana's grove at Nemi, who set their traps every night and kept guard against younger, keener challengers who would inevitably come, conquer, and rule until someone younger and meaner killed them in their turn. He looked about the simple, gracious room and wondered how Hester would react if he claimed sanctuary here. After all, he thought with an inward grin, it was a "temple."

Her suggestion that they take their coffee and sit by the fire saved him from making an ass of himself. They settled in deep wing chairs, and he started to talk of his dreams to do a translation of the *Aeneid* "like Lattimore's or Fitzgerald's Greek translations. Illustrated, too. Wouldn't Baskin do a marvelous job? Did you see his illustrated *Dante*?"

"And printed on that wonderful heavy paper," she agreed. "You don't see that sort of book very often these days. Why haven't you started?"

Because I don't know if I'll have the time or the place to finish it. Because if I can't stay here, I'll have to go on demolishing other people's quick, snappy articles and writing quicker, snappier articles of my own. Because I don't have a choice . . . yet.

She started to reply, caught his eye, then looked down. A sudden noise, like ice clattering from a slanted roof, broke the tension between them. "I don't think that's snow," she said. "We have deer hereabouts, you know. I want to make certain that they don't break into the shed. Sometimes they get a little too hungry. If you go to the window, David, you might get a glimpse of them."

She slipped out of the room before he could offer to go with her. Light footsteps echoed down the hall to the door. He glanced out the window and saw amber light fan out from the triangular window over the door. He brushed the white curtains aside and leaned his forehead against the chilly window-frame. The glass looked hand-rolled, he noted idly.

The window gave him a view both of the yard and the tiny porch. Suddenly Hester appeared on it, her hands full of bread, which she flung onto the snow.

Three deer started forward. One nudged a fawn at the nearest piece of bread, then bent to eat herself. Then David glanced further out into the night. The moon was up; he could see clearly. What looked like the old painting of a peaceable kingdom — or Hesiod's description of a Golden Age — encircled the old house. Beside a fox crouched squirrels; the large dog from Stemple's house ignored three quivering-eared rabbits. What looked like a pheasant strutted out toward the bread. Its tail dragged not three feet

from an enormous black-and-white cat. A shadow moved, belly-down against the snow. It was larger than the black-and-white, and shyer, and its ears were tufted. David realized that it was one of the rare wildcats that some people said still lived in the hills hereabouts.

He almost grabbed the poker and ran out of the house to defend Hester — not that there was much he could do if the cat decided to pounce. But all the animals watched her intently. The deer finished the bread, rose and looked at her. Then, very slowly, they bent their heads, bowing until their slender forelegs were all but extended in front of them.

That wasn't thanks, David thought. If he hadn't been a rational man, he would have called it worship. He had seen animals do clever tricks for food before. As the moonlight spilled down across the snow, it blended with the warmer light from the house — hearthfire against icy white light — and flooded over Hester. She seemed to tower, to glimmer, and when David's sight cleared, she seemed more tall than human. Frantically rational, David tried to marvel at how the light struck her lustrous hair and the old jade pendant she wore, haloing her.

She nodded and raised a hand up at the moon. Untroubled by the cold, she stepped off the porch into the yard, as smoothly as if she walked down the hall. The folds of her long, soft wool skirt flowed about her.

It looked as if her feet did not sink into the snow; she moved so gracefully. Of course that couldn't be . . . but Virgil's hexameter lines began to clamor in David's head. Where was it? Book I, he thought, in which Aeneas met a huntress and . . .

*... avertens rosea cervice refusit,
ambrosiaeque comae divinum vertice odorem
spiravere; pedes vestis deflexit ad imos:
et vera incessu patuit dea.*

There was no way he could translate that literally. "As she turned; light glittered from her rosy neck, and an immortal perfume breathed out from her immortal locks. Her garment flowed out down to her feet . . ." Call himself a translator? He wanted to reproach himself. A clever sophomore could have rendered the lines better.

He turned back to the window. The two cats, wild and tame, rubbed against her knees as she reached out to lay her hands on the heads of the deer. They met her eyes. She nodded, lifting her hands. As if released, the deer bounded toward the oak trees. The other animals dispersed more slowly, last of all, the black-and-white cat.

Hester stood alone, gazing up at the moon. David couldn't take his eyes from her; he had never felt so aware of anyone in his life. The awareness of her quivered in the quiet, civilized room. The air seemed to breathe out the clean scent of her hair and clothing. At that thought a violent fit of shivering took him; and he sank into the chair by the fire. He found himself listening for her step, the sure, graceful tread of someone completely in her element.

Whatever that might be. The thought set him to shuddering again. He longed for her to come back, but he dreaded that footstep. He remembered the last line of the passage he had quoted to himself but not allowed himself to translate. Hadn't dared, he forced himself to admit. The words seemed to quiver in the fire itself.

Vera incessu patuit dea. A true goddess was revealed in her footstep.

Certainly she was no Venus, and for all her fondness for the animals gathered outside, no Diana either. To be fair, he was no Aeneas: no son to a goddess, no hero, just one of the people in this town who held out hands to her and could not be sent away unfulfilled. It had been hubris to think that Hester Cantwell needed children of her own. Children? She had thousands of them — and he supposed now that he was one.

David struggled out of his chair and knelt to tend the fire. Hadn't he wanted to claim sanctuary here in this temple to a minor goddess? Apparently, he could. She would find him kneeling at her hearth, as was fitting. Tomorrow, he would tell his chairman that he was going to start translating the *Aeneid*, and that he intended to dedicate it to Hester Cantwell.

Tonight, he would tell Her. He thought they would both understand.

UPON HEARING NEW EVIDENCE THAT METEORS CAUSED THE GREAT EXTINCTIONS

It's there beneath everybody's shoes,
a mother-sized chalk line. The One
that Death said over, "Cross this, baby!"
During the months of its accumulation, maybe
dinosaurs queued up like 0s in a googolplex,
marched off in search of the sun.
Shellfish literally died in their beds.
I imagine Hudson's Bay the size of two Quebecs
and wonder when the next zero-time's due.
I begin thumbing catalogs in my head
for underwear rated down to the absolute.
I'm talking serious winters you can't refute.

— Robert Frazier

TRANSIENTS
by Darrell Schweitzer
art: James Faulkenberg

Darrell Schweitzer has been a long-time contributor to Amazing® Stories; his first appearance in the magazine was an interview he had with Robert Silverberg in 1976. He has been writing steadily — both fiction and nonfiction — for us since then.

This tale, however, is his first SF sale to Amazing Stories. Of this feat he claims, "Maybe the ghost of Hugo Gernsback will forgive me now, since all my previous stories in the magazine have been fantasy." Having read the following fascinating story, we're sure that Hugo will.

I remember —

I remember a row house in West Philadelphia where the stained wooden paneling and the reproduction antique furniture and the fire in the fireplace on a dark November evening conspired to produce the pleasant, if incongruous, atmosphere of an Olde Countrie Inne. I remember sitting by that fire so many times in a padded chair, listening to the flames crackling and the sounds of my wife preparing dinner in the kitchen at the back of the house.

I remember my wife, too. Her name was Martina, but at times it seems I have only one image of her remaining: that of her bringing me my slippers and the newspaper as I sit in that chair by the fireplace after a long day's work. That isn't right. It makes her seem more like a faithful dog than a person, but she really did do those things, from her own sense of routine, infusing order into the world around her. I remember the repeated things. Most of the rest melts away, like mist before the sun.

I remember, finally, the pair of slippers she brought me on a particular, foul November evening. They were made of brown leather, with white fur around the edges, and were very worn.

I held them up.

"But these aren't mine."

She shrugged. "Whose are they then? It's your feet that have been going in them all this time."

"All what time?"

Now she looked at me strangely. "Since the summer before last, when we got them at that Indian place in Maine. Don't you remember?"

I put the slippers on. They certainly felt as if I'd been wearing them since the summer before last. I retreated into making a joke about it.

"Ah, yes, the Squash-a-ma-quoddy Indians. How could I forget?"

She didn't laugh. She just said, "Alan, your brain is going soft," and went into the kitchen to resume her cooking, leaving me sitting there, staring down at the slippers. Now there is little terror in a pair of slippers, but I felt a touch of unease just then, like that first, subtle, downward jolt when the elevator cable begins to fray.

I must have known somehow that *right there* it began. From that instant, we began to drift apart.

I try to remember.

"Gabby stayed late at school for band practice," Martina said over dinner. "Then she'll be at Alice Conover's for a while."

Gabrielle was our daughter, aged eleven, and Alice Conover was her best friend. I still remember that much, although I can barely call them to mind.

"Oh, and by the way, Joe Meese called from work after you left, and said he's hosting another of his poker parties tonight. Why don't you go? I wanted to watch something on PBS anyway."

I went. By the time we had finished eating and the dishes were cleared away, the wind was gusting outside, and rain and sleet rattled against the windows, but I had decided that, yes, a night of gambling away pocket change and telling dirty jokes was the very thing for the indefinable unease which had come over me. I put on a coat and a thin plastic raincoat over that and went to the door.

"Don't be out too late," Martina called. "It may be Friday, but we have the flea market tomorrow."

"Yes, yes, I remember. See you about eleven."

I stepped out onto the porch and locked the door. It was as I turned and reached for the iron porch gate that I noticed a man standing on the sidewalk in front of the house, huddled in a shapeless coat, bareheaded and dripping in the savage weather.

He was old, perhaps sixty-five, and disheveled, but he wasn't threadbare or filthy, and he lacked that empty look the city's population of homeless lunatics usually have. He wasn't a bag person. He just looked . . . lost as he stood there, staring neither exactly at me nor at anything in particular. The thought came to me that he might be a burglar scouting out the neighborhood, but I flinched inwardly at the sheer absurdity of the idea.

I stood with one hand on the gate.

"May I help you with something? Are you looking for someone?"

His eyes met mine briefly, and for an instant his face came alive, first something almost like joyful recognition, then sadness, then that blank expression again. He merely stood there in the rain and cold, and I was the one who began to shiver.

"I said, 'May I help you?'"

Still he stood there silently. I debated going back into the house rather than leaving Martina alone with this guy just outside, but I didn't. I tried to



shrug him off as one of the city's peculiar sights. So I opened the gate, stepped through, shut it again, walked briskly down the steps, and started to get into my car.

Then I noticed that the man was pointing at me. His hand was shaking, not from cold, but for gentle emphasis, as if to say, yes, I know you. I know everything.

I got into the car quickly, slammed the door shut, and locked it, then looked up to see the stranger walking away from me toward the end of the block. I watched him go until he was around the corner. Then I started the car. When I got to that corner, I looked for him, but he was gone.

There. There, too, it began.

Joe Meese lived in the Germantown section of the city. It was an easy drive, the streets empty because of the weather. Joe's street was lined with trees, so many of them that in the darkness and the wind they whipped and writhed and swayed like waves in a hurricane. The rain came in curtains, then sleet again, rattling like pebbles on the car's roof.

I ran to Joe's front porch, rang the bell, and stood there shivering, nervously hopping up and down, muttering to myself, "Come on. Come on—"

There was a familiar barking on the other side of the door. Heavy claws scratched wood. It was Woof, the Meeses' oversized setter/collie/whatever. If I stood on tiptoes, I could see the eager brown-and-white face staring up at me through the door's glass panels.

"Hey! Bark louder. Make them let me in."

The tone of the barking changed, no longer a challenge, but instead an expectant yelping.

"Glad to see you, too. Now, make enough noise so Joe can hear you."

The dog obliged, and I rang the bell again.

The door swung open, and there was Joe, cigarette in one hand, beer in the other.

He didn't stand aside. I made to step past him, into the house.

"Jesus, Joe, you pick the damnedest nights —"

His hand slammed into my chest, cigarette and all.

"Just one moment, buddy. Where do you think you're going?"

"What?"

I was so flabbergasted I didn't know what to say. I just let him push me back through the doorway.

"I said, 'What do you want here, mister?'"

"But — but —"

"Look, whoever you are, I don't know who you are or why you're here, but I'll just have to ask you to leave or —"

The dog jumped up, trying to lick my face. Joe shoved it aside with his foot, and said, "Sit!" very firmly. Woof sat, looking up at me longingly.

"If this is some kind of joke," I managed to say, "I don't get it, Joe. Please

stop."

"I don't get it either," he said, pushing me back into the rain.

I could tell by his voice and his face that this was not a joke, that he was on the edge of being scared and trying not to show it. And in his eyes, there was no recognition at all.

"Joe —"

"You must have come to the wrong house. This must be a mistake," he said.

He slammed the door in my face.

I stood there in the rain, looking no doubt as lost as the old man I'd seen in front of my own house. What had happened was so contrary to all expectations that I didn't feel *anything* just yet. My mind tried to shut it all out while my body went on auto-pilot, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting in my car, staring up at a streetlight through the rain as it rippled down the windshield.

I sat there — I don't know how long — just numb, trying to cling to the feeble excuse that it was all an extraordinarily tasteless joke, for all Joe Meese had never been one to play stupid jokes, and, in any case, he wasn't that good an actor. Or somehow, inexplicably, I had lost my way in the dark and the rain (or maybe bratty kids had turned the street signs around) and found myself on a very *similar* street, but not the *right* street, and by one of those incredible coincidences which would be rejected by *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* for implausibility, there just *happened* to be a total stranger living there who looked exactly like my long-time office buddy, Joe Meese.

There was a lighted window at the end of the street. I leaned forward, peering through the rain, and recognized the grocery store at the corner. Often, during Joe's parties, someone had been sent to that store to pick up extra dip or ice or whatever.

Almost before I realized I was doing it, I got out of the car again and ran to the grocery store. I burst through its door, and stood there, panting for breath, surveying the familiar shelves and counters.

"Nasty one out there tonight," the clerk said.

"Yeah," I said, and hurried over to the pay phone, which was in the back by the store's single video-game machine.

I hesitated for a moment, as if before some irrevocable decision, and then dialed Joe's number. Luck was with me. He was the one who answered the phone.

"Very funny," I said.

"What? What's funny?"

"Joe, this is Alan Summers."

"Alan! I hope Martina told you about the party. Come on over, old pal, old buddy! Fred's here, and Roger, and Bob Steele. You know how hard it is to make them wait on a good poker game!"

"Look," I said as slowly and deliberately as I could. "I'm at the grocery down the street. I have already been to your house, but you turned me away like I was a complete stranger barging in uninvited. Now would you mind telling me why?"

There was a pause.

"Joe?"

"Alan . . . I don't get what you're saying. I have been here all along, with the others, and no one has come to the door since a half an hour ago, when Roger arrived. I think you are the one who needs to explain."

"I can't," I said. "I'll be right over, okay? Then maybe this'll make some sort of sense."

"Okay." His voice was cold, uncertain.

I hung up and leaned against the wall by the phone, swaying, both hands pressed against my temples. I wondered if I had gone completely mad. But that was a feeble excuse, too. I knew perfectly well I hadn't. Nobody who is crazy thinks he is crazy. The complete raving loonie thinks he is the only sane person in the world, surrounded by nut cases too stupid to understand him. I was beginning to be genuinely afraid.

"You all right?" the clerk at the counter asked.

"Yeah, sure. Thanks."

I hurried from the store.

When I got back to Joe's house, my gut-level instinct told me that the most sensible thing to do, the safest thing, the way to escape, was to just get into my car and drive home and tell myself lies over and over until I was convinced this had never happened.

But it had happened, and I knew it had, and something else inside me drove me to walk up to that door and ring the bell again. I rang it. Once more the dog enthusiastically announced my arrival.

The door opened, and there was Joe again, holding the dog by the collar. I stared, sure I was seeing things.

It wasn't the same dog. It wasn't Woof at all, but a large, pure-bred, yellow-and-white collie which also, somehow, seemed to know me.

"*Why have you come back?*"

I pushed my way past him, into the living room. He had his hands full trying to restrain the dog, which was still trying to lick my face, yelping excitedly all the while.

"Joe," I said, turning to him. "I don't know if I've done something wrong, but if I have, I'm sorry. Still, no matter what it was, you don't have to treat me like I'm some bum in off the street. *What the hell is going on?*"

I felt the fear again, the cords of the elevator cable snapping one by one, faster now, the plunge beginning.

He was obviously afraid, too.

"I don't know how you know my name," he said, "and maybe this is a

mistake of some sort, but I still don't know who you are, mister, or why you are here or what you want. But I want you *out of my house right now!*"

"Joe! It's me, Alan Summers, your friend! What is this?"

"Joe? Who's at the door?" a woman called from the next room. I knew the voice, of course. It belonged to Alice, Joe's wife. I'd known her as long as I'd known Joe, eight or nine years. She was my one hope.

"Alice!" I yelled. "Alice, come here please."

She came, saw me, and stopped.

"Joe, who is this man? Some friend of yours?"

"I swear to God," he said. "I've never seen him before in my life. Only he was here five minutes ago, trying to get in like he owned the place."

She began to back away, one hand over her mouth, staring at me wide-eyed. "Do you want me to call the police?" she said.

"No," I said softly. "You don't have to do that. It's all a mistake. I'll go. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

A minute later I was on the sidewalk, making my way slowly back to the grocery store, running my hand along the wooden fence in the front of my friend's yard. I wanted to go back to the store, to call him on the phone again and plead with him, but I couldn't. I just stood there, cold and wet and afraid. I must have stood still for five or ten minutes. Then I was in my car, completely drenched, my teeth chattering, crying like a lost child.

I got home very late that night. It must have been past two. I spent the hours just driving aimlessly, trying to think, to make sense out of what was happening to me. I kept coming back to the fact that *the dog knew me*, as if that meant something, as if that were the key, but it meant nothing and there was no key. And the dog had changed between one time and the next, which was completely impossible, of course, but no more impossible than the idea that some malign, cosmic equivalent of Rosemary Woods had performed incredible contortions to erase part of my life, leaving these inexplicable eighteen-minute gaps. No, it wasn't that.

I remember sitting at a stoplight on an empty, rain-slick street, gazing up at Billy Penn's statue atop City Hall, wondering if it really was the same statue I'd always known, or one which was, somehow, different.

When I finally turned the bolt on the door and stood in my own living room, Martina called down from the top of the stairs.

"Alan? Is that you?"

"I . . . think so."

"Alan, are you all right? I got worried, so I called the Meeses, and Joe said you'd called once but never showed up. I didn't know what to do next."

"I don't know what to do next either," I said softly.

"What?"

I took off my raincoat and my regular coat, which was also wet, and looked around for a place to put them. There was none, so I hung them on the door-

knob.

"Martina . . . Marty . . . please come down and talk to me. Just come down." My voice broke. I was crying again.

She came down, in curlers and bathrobe and slippers, a concerned expression on her face. For an instant I felt the most hopeless, helpless terror I had ever known, as I was certain she didn't recognize me and was about to run up the stairs and call the police. But she merely paused, two steps from the bottom, then continued cautiously, startled, bewildered, but not acting at all like a woman who confronts a total stranger in her house late at night.

"What's wrong, Alan?"

"Something . . . very disturbing has happened. Just sit with me."

We sat on the sofa in front of the fireplace, across from my so familiar armchair. The newspaper she'd brought me that evening was still there.

I told her what had happened that evening, all of it, as best I could.

"It's like I've lost my grip," I said, "like I'm drifting out of the lives of the people around me, just drifting away. I don't know what I've done or what the reason is, but, Joe and I, we were not in quite the same world anymore —"

I couldn't say anything more. I sat still, interlocking my fingers, joining my hands together, then moving my hands until some of the fingers missed, and more did, until I was grasping my left thumb with my right pinkie. Then I spread my hands apart, palms up, and looked into Martina's eyes.

"It's all crazy," I said. "It can't happen, but it's happening. I want you to tell me it's not, but I know better. It would just be a lie."

I embraced her then, my head upon her shoulder, and once more I wept like a child. She put her arms around me lightly.

"What I'm most afraid of is that somehow everything will change, and Gabby won't know her father anymore. . . ."

She sucked in breath suddenly, stiffened, and let go of me. I drew back, and as I looked into her face, I saw the change taking place, *right there*. The concern faded. The expression became totally different, a kind of shocked bewilderment, a sense of being imposed upon, something bordering on rage.

"How can you do this to me?" she said. "You promised me you would never mention that name again. Remember? Our daughter's name is Julia. Gabrielle died when she was a baby. You know that?"

She rose from the sofa and turned her back on me, and I knew then, with the utmost certainty, that there was nothing more I could do. It had happened, completely and totally, whatever it was.

"Go to bed," I said in desperation. "Go to sleep and in the morning everything will be fine. None of this will have happened."

She backed away from me. I got up and shooed her up the stairs. "Go on," I said. "I'll be a little while yet."

I waited until I heard her close our bedroom door behind her, and then I slowly made my way up the stairs.

I walked very quietly past our bedroom, down the hall to the end, and there, as carefully as I could, I opened another door and peered in.

Our daughter was asleep amid huge pillows, beneath an E.T. bedspread I could recognize even by the dim glare of her night-light.

I slipped into the room, but I didn't turn the overhead light on. I was afraid to, lest I see her too clearly, and she turn out to be too tall, or a blonde instead of a brunette, or merely a stranger to me. I groped around for one of her school copybooks, tore out a page slowly, and crouched by the night-light, writing a short note with a felt-tip pen: DARLING, YOUR FATHER LOVES YOU VERY MUCH, BUT HE HAS TO GO AWAY. TRY TO REMEMBER HIM.

I picked up her alarm clock and placed the note under it. The clock said 2:45. It was no more than ten and a half hours since this had all begun, but the elevator cable had snapped now, and I had fallen very far, very fast. I was beyond trying to understand.

I stood for a few minutes, gazing at the sleeping girl, and then I left the room.

I did not look in on Martina again. Instead, I went downstairs, got a dry coat out of the closet, and left the house. The rain had stopped by then, but the wind was bitterly cold.

I walked the streets for hours, taking note of all the familiar houses in the neighborhood until, after a while, they were no longer familiar. Once a police car cruised right by me, very slowly, but I stood motionless until it was gone. I had not been seen. How very appropriate, I thought to myself, that I was becoming invisible, too. It was, after all, the next logical step.

It was dawn when I boarded a streetcar and sat in a kind of stupor as it rushed into the tunnel at 40th Street. It was somehow comforting to be inside the tunnel, with the world shut out and concrete walls whizzing past, blurring into a featureless grey. I listened numbly as the stops were called out: 37th Street, Sansom, 35th, and Saint Mary's Academy — it no longer mattered that there was no 35th-Street stop on this line or no place called Saint Mary's Academy.

I got off at 30th Street, and walked slowly along the traffic island between the huge main post office and the equally monumental 30th-Street train station. I thought of them as two vast tombs, containing the bones of all the kings of the Earth.

After a while, I stood on a bridge, staring down into the Schuylkill River, watching the colors and the waves, the light and shadow, and the occasional bits of debris. The pattern was always changing, never the same from one moment to the next, never ever returning to what it once had been.

Another police car went by, ignoring me.

Some days passed. I had some money with me, so I ate in restaurants, among crowds of strangers, until my increasingly unkempt state made waiters shy away from me. I tried to keep clean, using the sinks in the men's

room at the train station. I lived in that station, like so many others, who were also lost, but for different reasons.

Once or twice I saw people I knew, co-workers from the office passing through on their daily commutes. The first time this happened, I hid myself. Afterwards, I always carried a newspaper to hide behind when the time came. I never dared to approach any of them, for fear of what they might say if I asked them if they had ever known someone named Alan Summers.

After a while, I saw them no more, and all the people around me were strangers, the great masses of them flowing, changing, changing again, until I never saw the same face twice and all the faces blended into a sameness, like the blur of the rushing subway tunnel.

I slept on a bench once, and dreamt that I was the old man, standing in the rain outside my house, slowly dissolving in that rain like a candy man, a figure of hard sugar discarded in a gutter. And I dreamt that my daughter sat up suddenly in her darkened bedroom, and called out, "Daddy, are you there?" I tried to answer, but my voice was lost in the rain, in the rushing water, and I seemed to be falling away from the front of the house. Again my daughter called out, and again, and I could not reply, until the front of the house rippled and blurred, like something seen through rain streaming down an automobile windshield. Then there was only darkness, and a sense of drifting. My daughter's name and her face and all my memories of her began to slip away. I could not cling to them.

It was then that I awoke to the touch of a gentle hand on my shoulder. I sat up abruptly, with a startled grunt, and found a woman standing over me. She was probably in her early twenties, and she wore blue jeans and an army jacket and a stocking cap. A knapsack hung from one shoulder.

She was a traveler, I thought. Yes, someone who travels far, who travels without ever stopping to rest, or to find a home. I could tell all that about her, somehow, as if I were developing a new sense.

"Perhaps I can help you," she said. As we beheld one another, we both understood, she why I was there, and I why she had selected me among all the shabby denizens of the train station benches.

She had done so because I was a traveler, too, and she had that same special sense which enabled her to recognize one of her own kind.

"Come," she said. I rose and followed her, out into the enormous, main hall of the station.

It took me a moment to recognize what was different: there had been a war memorial inside the station, a colossal bronze statue of a winged Victory lifting a fallen soldier out of flames. That was how I remembered it. Now the figure was a charging World War I doughboy.

Outside, on the bridge over the river, the old man was waiting for us. He, too, knew me for what I was, and I knew him.

"There are not many like us yet," he said, "but we are like you, all of us.

Like you, we move on. We never stay in one place very long."

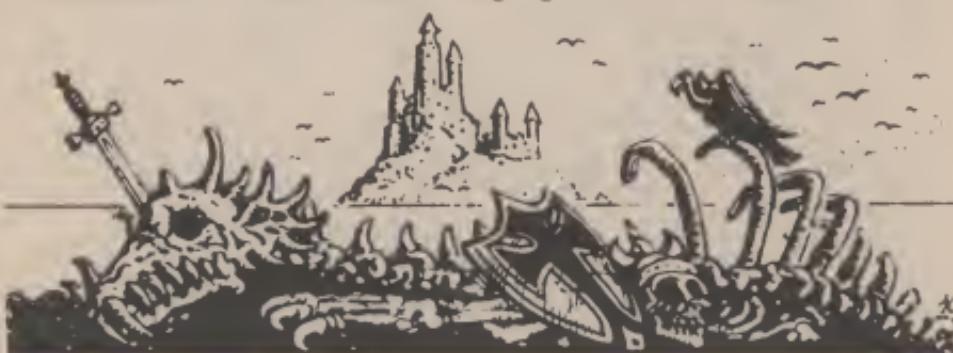
We are a family, the young woman and the old man and the others I met in a cellar, where our band gathers at certain times, when each of us knows deep inside that it is time for another meeting. Sometimes the meeting place is not a cellar at all, but an inn or a courtyard or a field or even the deck of a ship at sea. But always the faces are there, twenty or so familiar to me, and always one or two new ones.

My eyes are newly opened. I see for the first time.

The woman's name is Mara. She reached into her pocket once and showed me a Woodrow Wilson dime. The old man is Jason, and he is eighty-two, and is our chieftain and priest and rememberer. It is he who keeps and reads aloud from the book of our lives, in which is written all that can be recalled and preserved. I lived in Philadelphia. Jason was born in New Orleans long ago, shortly after the triumphal entry of the emperor Napoleon IV.

We are alone, but we are together, and the true things about us are written and remembered. The rest drifts away like mist rising from a perfectly still lake.

Remember. That's all we have. Cling together and remember.



LIGHT READING

His office is the night, an open sky,
A crane that levers down the stars
With the hum of clockwork;
And everything that ever was
Reachable on these two ladders — time,
And declination toward the pole —
In the library of rolled-up spectra
That embraces earth, his desk.

VERGIL AND THE CAGED BIRD

by Avram Davidson
art: Stephen Fabian



Avram Davidson's The Phoenix and the Mirror (1969) introduced the magus Vergil, in whose world the medieval scholastic beliefs about the nature of things are true. Here is an episode from his life; Doubleday, meanwhile, is publishing the long-awaited new novel, Vergil in Averno, chronicling an earlier time in Vergil's life.

Assuming each letter to have its own numerical value, which is after all to assume the obvious, as every schoolchild does well know — assuming each letter to have its own numerical value, the word *crowd* does not add up to the word *true*. Or *truth*. Scan them. Let A = 1, and so C (for *crowd*) equals 3; take it thence. Vergil had taken the presence of the crowd for granted. He had not summoned it and scarcely could he have prevented it from gathering. And yet. There stood he and there stood the one whom he must question and around them stood the crowd and around the crowd stood the buildings of the center of the city of Naples, some of them standing from its foundation, plaster peeling and stucco scumbling by the knife and brush of time and the rubbings of many bodies, breaking it down to show the rough rude stones of the founding day.

“Whence comest thou?” asked Vergil, speaking, not as one having authority, but speaking, simply, as might one to another. And yet almost he dissembled. And though the man he addressed might have merely shrugged on by, instead he paused. He stood a moment silent, in one hand a cage with a bird in it. The bird was caged and the bird did not struggle; still, it did seem that this was not a cage-bird type of fowl.

“High ‘Pulia,’ said the man who held the cage.

Vergil was doubtful. Vergil seemed doubtful; nevertheless, he was. The crowd was varied as are most crowds, therein lie their savors. A session of senators, a tiring (as one might say) of tailors — whatever — would lack the same savor. There near-bye was a fowl-sharper, next and by no means as acute-looking an aging produce-broker. Vergil stood so the man with the cage could not civilly brush past him; Vergil turned to the former, one Cocko, not his real name and perhaps he did no longer know what was, perhaps he *need* no longer know: what use to him now agnomen, cognomen? *Cocko!* Good enough for all days, nowadays. The man was short and stocky and his face square and well-lined with grooves of self-satisfaction. Cocko could supply a lawful capon fattened for the cook-spit better than any; also he could, did he desire, fix any pigeon-race; he did not desire. Any longer. Rare birds he could cozen and catch — Vergil spoke to him.

“Well, Squire Cocko, and what bird be that in cage?”

The man’s face changed, he pursed his lips and moved them a bit, not as the old produce-broker, whose aged chops moved incessantly: Cocko moved his own lips now. As if he liked the taste of something. Such as the word *Squire*. “Ah, whoa, Master Magen,” he said, touching his new white-woven-hat, “tez a farty — that is,” hastily, “in our cant, ah whoa. In *yours*, me Master Magen, tez a pheasant.” A pheasant it was indeed which the man, an Asian of some sort, Lydian, Cappadocian, Phrygian, Pontian, perhaps, had in the withy-cage. A fairly new-fangled bird. So.

“Squire, so: right you are.” Why should no one else ever have called ‘Cocko,’ *Squire*? ‘Twas harmless . . . and he *liked* it. The Asian liked it all not, but yet he moved not away. It was just as well. Just as well. A woman at

the well let water run into her jug, a one which sang a bittle as the air went out. Now and then the novelty was in the fashion. Now and then it was out. Now and then a woman at a well might find herself giving water to some lord not tired as such, or to the steward of one far-off. For the most part the woman merely toiled, however, and did she find the few short notes of music a relief from toil, 'twas pity she might not always find such a jug for a new one when the old one broke. For, lords, stewards, music, not: the old one always broke.

"Squire, so, right you are, and tell me, can your art extend to causing the fayobirdy," here Cocko and a few others laughed, and neither they nor Vergil paused to explain why, "to extrude the contents of his crop without hurting him?"

But here Vergil over-mastered himself, and a slight cloud settled on the fowler's face. At once the fellow at his side, whom one would have thought till then a porter between porting jobs, forgetting a perfectly-planned schema to play ould Cocko's shill in a moment, burst out, "Ee magen squab, 'Meck ya cree meck ta fay-flowely, push his yock belay outchen un?" In an instant Cocko had the bird out of the cage, his fellow peaceably but effectively blocking the Asian's protesting arm: a slight movement, and there, lo! how the crowd laughed: there inside the crown of the fowl-fooler's own new hat lay the contents of the pheasant's crop.

The old broker-dealer spoke up, chawing the while. "Olive mash," said he, having given the mass in the hat a glance.

No more than a glance.

Vergil said nought.

No one said aught.

Then someone, by looks a tenant-farmer out of tenantry, said, slowly, "Why . . . they bain't moshin oliva yet. Nay. Nay."

The old produce-man gummed away. "Olive mash," said he.

He suspected nothing, expected nothing, was privy to nothing: he knew what he knew and said what he knew. Vergil asked — of no one in particular — "Where be they mashing olives now? Does any know?"

Any knew. In the Senate perhaps might not any know, or in a lodge of tailors or of tylers, no: in the crowd: yes. . . . "Why, nerezt they bringen in oliva now, why me lard sor, it S'uth S'cilia. Be." The statement was repeated, pronounced correct. The crowd pressed close. The Asian, and it was surely one of Little Asia, that droop-cap, that bone-stiff nose, blue eyes, blue beads, and red-shoulder cape, surely added up to no other provenance than Little Asia, had said a thing they now knew was not so. Why? They asked this aloud. Then they asked it loud.

Little recked the Little Asian, but a little he did reck; an ass-cart piled high with parsnips rattled by and as soon as the trundle-sound ceased, eagerly the man said, nervously, "My lor's, my sers, masters, may I swear it by my nose and ears, I ben not in Sickillia South for this time twellev year. . . ."

And Vergil said, with a nod, "He speaks the truth." A sigh from the Asian. Who would move on. No one moved away. Many a sigh. Then — "But then you have been now . . . where?" The Asian now displayed a tongue. The tongue caressed lips. The lips parted.

"Oy hearn whut hay tall," said old Cocko, having casually assumed, probably for mere practice, one of the many accents at his gift. The woman had filled her jug, began away, observed the crowd, became one of it; a Tartar she was: a slave, to say. "Oy hearn hay tall hay ben at High 'Pulia. Nay, so? Way oll hearn. Nay, nah?"

The crowd affirmed. The Asian stole a swift glance. The crowd pressed closer. "I don't believe," Vergil said, "that in High Apulia they are gathering olives in yet, alone crushing the fruit for the presses. But may hap so? May hap an early —"

The Asian seized hold of Vergil's hands. "I swear by what chee ask, I ben not —"

Vergil said, "They say that twice a year the caged quail beats its head against the cage; at other times is still. Well. I've said I know you spoke the truth, for far more than a half-a-year have you not been in Southern Sicily. True. Twelve years? True. But it may be . . . mayn't it be? . . . that the bird has been?"

The crowd stopped buzzing, began to look at each other and at the bird and from the bird to the Asian and from the Asian to the Magus Vergil and then at each other and in the silence from half-way up the street was heard the voice of a mendicant street-narrator, half-blind or all-blind, "*And the King of Cappadocia he sayeth, Galatia shall be mine, he sayeth, sayeth the King of Cappadocia, and he skarpens the skythes upon the hubs of his cher-riot wagons for to rip the Galatianses to p'ices, skarpens he, and the King of the Galatianses he gatherers his wise men to set for a council, saying, Och, wisha, what shall I be doing to portect my wee ones? is saying the King of,*" but this account, if one might term it such, had been crawling its way along the length of Little Asia, Larger Asia, AEgypt, Lybya the Less, Lybya the More, Syrtis Major, Bauboo-al-zing, and places it were valueless to compute, without anyone ever learning anything of detail, let alone of value, as to what decision was come to by the Galatians, a people not known widely for coming to decisions: and old Cocko asked, "The bird, ser?"

"Yes. Of what, for instance, Squire, does the fayobirdy smell?"

Cocko said, "O' millet-meal," he sniffed the bill and plumage, "of old bread, of arjoram-verb, like unto un were going to stuff un for a bankette;" but instantly the fowler dropped the jape, something struggled to pass between the plumage of the pheasant, glints of red amidst the brown, red almost purple it were fanciable, and the old man's nose; "— of arjoram-verb such as grow, such as grow;" excitement caused his voice to grow high as actually he himself was actually calculating and reckoning; "as grow, arjoram-verb, in Sitchly Squatch, *this bird ben there!*"

The crowd cheered, then, puzzled, began to growl and move; Vergil drew the Asian closer, for safe-keeping, by his side: the man came. Marjoram did indeed grow by the marge of the Sicilian Sea, on land too cut up for the great wheat crops to flourish: and what had this to do with this and that? Why was the great sage who housed himself in Naples to do with kitchen-herbs and caged birds, had he not a cook or cooks? and why troubled he to act as judge in a minor crowd-quarrel which, in truth to speak, he had largely himself begun? In truth to speak? In truth he could not have well said. It was not quite his nose, it was something more subtle, it was something pertaining to a fifth element, neither wind nor fire nor earth nor water, not any known of the humours: something on seeing the man with the caged bird, had said: *Pause*. And said, *Question*. And here he was, backed into a corner between a fountain of waters and a tiny temple frequented perhaps once a year by those who lacked even lares and penates, very slightly uneasily hoping he had not easily begun something which —

Nothing sublime. Merely ridiculous. Cocko's nose had never been lovely. It was reddled now, its nares opened wider than usual. "Smowk!" crowed old Squire Cocko. "Ee smal of smowk!"

And then Vergil asked, Where had there been of late some great fire? Such news was already getting around and right then the news gat *all* around: "The Toe! The Toe, Master! Ser Mage, they say —"

Bit by bit it was, after a manner, calculated. The bird was either loose when the fire started, or the bird was let loose? to save its life? had the bird somehow gotten loose, "lured back" how? had the bird been in High Apulia, no, it could not have flown thence to Southern Sicily and there have eaten the mash from the olive vats, thence to have flown back again; yes it could have flown across the Messinian Straits, how had it been recaptured? For surely there was reason and there were reasons why the Asian had behaved . . .

When women are of a crowd they are never of a crowd as are men; in the sudden silence she never noticed, the Tartar slave girl poured water into a tiny cup and offered it to the pheasant and when it had drunk she murmured, "Oh thou such a pretty bird," and pouting out her pale-pink-coral lips, kissed it, so. Suddenly a man stood there, and no bird more. The slave-girl did not scream, old Squire Cocko it was who screamed. The crowd gazed, stunned. The Little Asian was the color of glazier's ash. "Welcome, lordly ser, and who are you, that we might greet you well? I am called Vergil, of the Mages."

The tall man in the purple-red-brown sea-smelling robe said, "Woman, thou art free. Go, Asian, never again are we to see thee, alive, lest the bowyer bring ye 'tis-well-known-what. Magus, may one have some wine, there is a bitter taste in my mouth like that of olive mash, I know not why." He gave an abrupt shake of his head. "Citizens and subjects of Galatia, I am the King of Cappadocia and — Stay! What place is this?"

Frederik Pohl has played about every role that is possible in the field of science fiction: book and magazine editor, agent, teacher, poet, fan, and, above all, writer. As a first-rank writer in the field, he has been honored with numerous awards, including the Edward E. Smith award, the International John W. Campbell award, and the Nebula and Hugo awards.

His most recent appearances in Amazing® Stories were the excerpts from his third GATEWAY novel that were published in the January, March, and May 1984 issues.

Frederik currently makes his home in Palatine, Illinois, with his wife, Dr. Elizabeth Anne Hull.

Half a century ago a handful of science-fiction fans from New York City got on the train to take the long journey to Philadelphia. There, they were met by an equal number of Philadelphia fans. They were all male, and all pretty young — in their teens or twenties. They went to the home of one of the Philadelphia fans, where they called themselves to order and constituted themselves the first science-fiction convention of all time.

It would be interesting for historians dealing in such matters to know just what was discussed at that 1936 meeting, but that is no longer possible. It isn't that minutes weren't kept. They were. Unfortunately, the secretary lost them. (I know this because I was the secretary.)

That was the first. A few months later some fans in England heard of the event and decided it was such a good idea that they would have a convention, too. They did. The idea caught on. Local "cons" began to pop up all over, and only three years later, in 1939, the first-ever "World" Convention occurred in New York City. World War II made its debut around the same time, seriously interfering with many things — including science-fiction conventions. But as soon as the war was over, they began again, for there is something about science fiction that makes its readers want to see each other, and something about SF cons that makes those who attend one want

to come back for more.

Now, half a century after that first tiny gathering, there are literally hundreds of cons every year — some five hundred in the United States alone, and perhaps as many more in the rest of the world. Small ones may have only a couple of hundred in attendance. Large ones run up to ten thousand. The dollar volume has risen even more dramatically. The total budget for that first Philadelphia con in 1936 amounted to the price of half a dozen excursion tickets and a few ice-cream sodas. Now the actual cost of putting on a major science-fiction convention can approach a quarter of a million dollars, with hundreds of thousands more in air fares and hotel bills for those attending.

Did we know what we were starting, back in Philadelphia in 1936?

You bet we didn't. . . .

Why do people go to science-fiction conventions?

I heard Gordon R. Dickson give one reason, years ago, at a little convention in Maryland. "When I was a boy," said Gordie, "I had a dream that I would grow up to be something *interesting* — a scientist, or an explorer, or a writer. And I imagined that one day, if I were very lucky, I would be allowed to join a club of people like me. Then I would come back from, say, a long expedition devoted to hunting rare butterflies in the headwaters of the Amazon. I would drop in on my club. And there I would have a chance to talk to my fellow members — just back themselves, from, say, exploring the Greenland ice cap or preserving Chinese bamboo forests for the giant panda — and then we'd all go back to our interesting lives. Well," Gordie finished, "when I did grow up, it happened just that way. Only it wasn't one particular club that I found this in; it was in science-fiction conventions."

I have a little bit of that feeling, too. It's certainly a fact that some of the most interesting people I've ever known I've met at cons. Not just writers; they are certainly weird and wonderful enough, but I knew most of them already anyway. I'm talking about the readers. The fellow who modeled foetal development in computers; the one who told children's stories to other computers to see if they would understand; the ones who work in space, or in astronomy, or in nuclear physics; the musicians, the artists, the filmmakers; the plain people in ordinary jobs who still are good company; even, once a man who actually had, in fact, just come back from his second experience of parachuting onto the Greenland ice cap.

When science-fiction cons were new, the lure of the science-fiction convention was easy enough to understand. Science fiction itself was still a long, long way from being respectable. It occurred only in pulp magazines, and people who "mattered" never admitted reading the stuff. In some sense we were cellar Christians then, huddling in secret to conduct our rites away from the eyes of a hostile, pagan world. It was only at cons (or local club meetings, for they began to grow at about the same time) that we could find

fellow enthusiasts to whom we could dare to confess our love for Wells, Burroughs, and Doc Smith.

It isn't that way at all any more. Science fiction has long since become respectable — partly because the world has caught up with some of that early science fiction, and now no one laughs at such crazy sci-fi ideas as television, atomic energy, and space travel; partly because it has become so popular that for years on end it may dominate best-seller lists and *Variety's* tabulation of top-grossing movies. We don't have to hide from the world any more. But we still keep coming together, en masse, over and over again.

Since no other category of literature produces such gatherings, there must be something in the quality of science fiction itself that makes them happen. I believe this is so. It is hard to pin down just what that quality is, if only because science fiction itself is so hard to define. Yet it's clear that to read and enjoy science fiction does take a certain flexibility of mind, an intellectual curiosity, a willingness to explore new concepts. What science fiction is about, basically, is *change*. It is about the ways in which the world, and ourselves, would be different, if certain things happened in a different way.

Once Arthur C. Clarke said, when asked why he chose to write science fiction, "because it is the only literature that concerns itself with reality." I understand him to mean by that that special reality we all face — the reality of change; change that has reshaped all our lives, and is going on reshaping them every day, at an accelerating pace. That's the essence of science fiction that is omitted from most other kinds of writing, and because the science-fiction community understands and accepts that reality of change, it is pleasurable to spend time with others who do. Heaven knows, we seldom agree on where change is going, or even on what kinds of change are desirable and what are so horrid they cannot be faced — but that's understandable enough, too. Science-fiction people, writers and readers alike, are a pretty individualistic lot. One might almost go as far as to call them "stubborn" (not to say, "pig-headed"). After all, it takes a certain obstinacy of mind to look at the world around us and deny it: to say, yes, this is one way the world could be, but there are all these other possibilities as well.

And so science-fiction cons are forums for discussion. It is interesting to hear a famous author, editor, or artist get up and talk about his own ideas and speculations, and that is a regular feature of most cons. It is even more interesting to hear a panel discussion on the same subjects, and more interesting yet to participate, as con audiences invariably do, with questions, arguments, and debate. The distinction between speaker and listener is blurred, and interaction is the dominating theme.

In half a century of working at it, I've attended literally hundreds of science-fiction cons, in many places and of many varieties. There is a con for everybody, and probably one on his own home turf. There are academic cons, specializing in critical and bibliographic studies — the academic wing

of science fiction, the Science Fiction Research Association, holds a convention every year, in addition to local college symposia and conferences by the dozen. There are conferences of writers and other professionals in the field. The Science Fiction Writers of America, the writers' trade union, holds the annual Nebula banquet, which is a sort of mini-convention. And World SF, the international organization of persons professionally connected with science fiction in any capacity, holds its annual world general meetings in places like Rotterdam, Brighton, Budapest, and Vancouver. There are specialized cons devoted to particular areas in the field — *Star Trek*, comics, horror films — but, most of all, there are plain cons, not confined to any particular sort of attendee or special interest.

Most cons are put on by fans, for fans. Often writers, publishers, scientists, and others are invited to speak and participate, but it is the fans themselves who organize them and fill the audience.

Although each con is different, there are generally a couple of guests of honor — one a writer, another a fan — who are the heroes (or heroines) of the occasion; they will probably give talks, participate in panels, autograph books, and be available for anyone who wants to talk to them. There will almost certainly be a hucksters' room, which is to say a space set aside for people who deal in books, magazines, photographs, art objects, and any number of other items of merchandise science-fiction readers are likely to want to buy. There is usually an art show, displaying the work of both professional and amateur artists — most of it for sale to those who want to brighten the walls of their homes. There is frequently a costume ball. Not much dancing is generally done at this kind of ball, but the costumes, made by the fans themselves based on stories or characters or concepts out of science fiction, are always interesting and sometimes staggeringly handsome. There is usually a film program, concurrent with the panels and speeches, so if you are bored by talk, you can rest your eyes on a movie, which will present old favorites like *Things to Come* and *Forbidden Planet* along with such rare items as *Hardware Wars* and *Bambi Meets Godzilla* and other fan-produced shorts. Sometimes old films that are scarce even on cable or late-night TV are resurrected for such showings, so if you have always wondered what *Transatlantic Tunnel* or *Just Imagine* looked like, you may get a chance to see them at a con.

Some cons, in fact, specialize in film. The world leader of this sort is probably the French con held in Metz every spring, where old and new films are shown, sometimes before theater release; there are few panels or speeches in Metz, but a lot of movies for the thousands who show up every year. Chicago's annual Capricon usually has a separate program of nothing but Japanese science-fiction films, from the private collection of one of its members.

Of course, if you want to see Japanese science-fiction films, you can always go to Japan for a con. Japanese cons are at least as well organized as American ones. The one I attended in Osaka in 1983 pulled in some four

thousand participants, and it was a delight. Instead of an ordinary costume ball, it had a three-hour cabaret act on stage, with costumes and skits of a high level. (One tableau particularly delighted me. It showed a man in riding breeches and aviator's helmet, pointing a copper wand at the sky as he floated through the air. It was a faithful reproduction of an early cover from *Amazing Stories* for E. E. Smith's first novel, *The Skylark of Space*. It had been over fifty years since that cover appeared, and in a country thousands of miles away, but I was convinced all over again of the international quality of science fiction when I heard members of the audience murmuring to each other, "Suh-kye-a-larka," with recognition and delight.)

Japan is not the only country in the world to have an annual science-fiction convention; there are such events in England, Germany, Italy, Australia, Poland, Yugoslavia, and at least a dozen other countries, plus any number of regional or occasional events. But the United States, which began the custom, still has the most and the biggest.

Biggest of all, of course, is the Worldcon. It happens once a year, usually on Labor Day weekend, usually in the United States (or at least in an English-speaking country, although it did once take place in Germany). Last year's was in Melbourne, Australia; this year's will be in Atlanta; next year's in Brighton, England. Worldcons are *huge*. Very few hotels are big enough to hold the guests for a Worldcon; some cities are not. Worldcons have everything you would go to a convention for, doubled; in fact, one of the troubles with Worldcons is that more is going on than any individual can keep up with.

This is almost as true of some of the larger regional annual cons, but they all have special qualities that make them worthwhile anyhow. Boskone (Boston, every February) draws on scientific talent from M.I.T. and the space-age industries around the area; Lunacon in New York every spring has the resources of the science-fiction publishers and editors at its disposal; the West Coast conventions are heavy with writers, most of whom have migrated there to get away from cold winters. Ohio (and midwest conventions in general) have a tradition of "relaxacons" — little or no programming, just a chance to spend a weekend with other fans — in addition to the more structured occasions. There is no section of the country, from Minneapolis to the Deep South, that doesn't have its selection of conventions available.

This year there is one special one. The annual Philcon is taking cognizance of the historical fact that it all began in that city, half a century ago this year. So the Philadelphia fans are planning a special program. Its principal feature will be the resurrection of as many fossils from that long-gone occasion as they can bring to life (myself included), and the con will celebrate fifty years of con-going.

Then we'll all take a long, deep breath . . . and start getting ready for the centennial.

SNORKELING IN THE RIVER LETHE

by **Rory Harper**
art: John Lakey

Rory Harper is another noisy Texas writer. He claims, though, that he is not a cyberpunk, as so many of the other noisy Texas writers seem to be. He's much too old for that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, his career goal is to become retroactively one of the great pulp-writers of the 1950s.

Oddly enough, he doesn't remember writing this story.

She'd chopped him while he soaked in the tub. When I made the scene, the hand ax still neatly bisected the area between his eyes and his hairline. I doubted that it was accidental that most of dead Fred's bleeding had taken place in the tub. A bloody towel soaking in the washbasin indicated that she'd sopped up any stray droplets that had marred her sparkling bathroom tiles. Francine was an all-around tidy murderer.

I looked at Fred for a minute and glanced around the bathroom. I poked into the medicine cabinet and the dirty-clothes hamper. I don't know why I bothered. I guess partly because the uniforms on the scene, one of whom watched from the doorway, sort of expect a homicide bozo to look for clues. Partly because sometimes you find surprises, even in cases like this one, where the perp is lounging in the other room, waiting to proudly recount how she whacked the deceased.

No surprises this time. Francine had used up her free felony, for sure. The uniform stood back as I stepped past him into the hallway that led past the apartment's bedroom to its tiny living room. She sat on the couch, inspecting her exquisitely trimmed and lacquered fingernails. Another couple of uniforms leaned casually against the wall behind her, talking about the latest nastiness the Pentagon had boosted into orbit to surprise the Sneaks if they came back for another visit.

Francine ignored them. I dropped into the chair across from the couch, leaned back, and propped my boots up on the glass-topped coffee table that separated me and Francine. She glared at my lack of couth.

"I'm Lieutenant Ryan," I said. I nodded at one of the uniforms who leaned against the wall, both now silently watching us. "Patrolman Hamilton says that when he and his partner got here, you chatted with them a bit. Of your own free will, after being told of your rights, you stated that you killed your husband with a hatchet and malice aforethought." I glanced at the holocorder on my wrist to make sure the battery-low indicator hadn't flicked on in the last thirty seconds. The uniforms had her recorded anyway,



Snorkeling in the River Lethe

but the habits of twenty years persist, and for good reason.

"Well . . ." Apparently, she'd been having second thoughts while checking her cuticles. "It's like, he was so bad to me, I just snapped, and —"

"You been a little feverish lately, Francine?"

She looked like the cat that swallowed the aviary. "A little."

"You ever been feverish before?"

"Once. I only forgot about a year and a half."

"How old are you, Francine?"

"Twenty-two."

"Kind of young to have murder on your record, don't you think?"

"He was rotten to me."

"In what way was he rotten to you, Francine?"

For just a moment, she was going to tell me. Then she glanced again at my boots scuffing up her furniture and frowned. "He treated me bad. That's all I have to say. Take me to jail."

I probably should have tried harder to unclam her, but what the hell did it matter? I looked at her. "You figure you'll be back here before the coroner finishes the slice job you started on Fred, don't you?"

She sulked for a second, then smiled at me. "Yes, I do. I'll be a fresh forgetty in a day or two, and you don't keep somebody in jail when they don't even remember breaking the law."

"We don't keep you the first time. The courts figure your crime could be merely the result of an unfortunate set of circumstances coming together tragically. Next time, though, we'll wonder if you have a basically criminal personality."

"There won't be a next time."

"Hard to believe. You used up your freebie pretty quick. From now on, whenever you have a little problem, you'll think about solving it the way you did with Fred. One day you'll do it, only you'll try to get away with it. And somebody like me will nail you."

She didn't even hear me.

I stood up. I was disgusted with myself for wasting breath. The only thing that would change this murderous little bitch's mind was a hot dose of Plague, and that was coming for her soon enough.

Outside, just before she climbed into the back of the blue-and-white, she turned to me. "I bet an old fart like you used up his freebie a long time ago. What did you do when you got a little fever that time, Lieutenant?"

"I've never had a little fever, Francine. But I'll keep you in mind if I ever do."

At the station-house, I processed Francine quickly. I had a special reason for wanting to get home. The captain caught me as I was climbing into clean clothes in the locker room. "Memory Morris has gone underground, Sam."

I grunted.

"The Institute called. They said he missed his last two exams."

"Paranoid little jerk, isn't he? Just because there's a war brewing and half a dozen Houston hoods have come to town to make holes in his scrawny body, he skips a couple of these real important appointments."

"Find him, Sam."

"Those dips at the Institute —"

"I ain't gonna argue. You and him are goddam national resources. You don't miss your exams, and he won't, either. Find him."

I stopped off and got flowers for Joyce on the way home. It was our anniversary, and besides, I hadn't apologized enough yet for the neighbor-waker we'd had a couple of nights ago. For some reason, they'd started coming more often lately, and we seemed to have a harder time making up afterward. But flowers could still do the trick.

The apartment was quiet when I talked the door shut behind me. Usually, she liked to keep the console on for the noise when she was by herself. I asked the door, and it said she hadn't checked out.

I called her name and started walking back toward the bedroom. She'd been sleeping more than usual, lately.

I found her in the kitchen. She lay in a heap beside the table. I guess I knew what had happened even before I gathered her up in my arms. Often, it hits real fast.

She was burning up.

As I was trying to pull the bedcover back while still holding her, she stirred. Her eyes opened blearily. "Sam? I feel so horrible."

"It's okay, baby. I'll take care of you."

Her eyes rolled closed again.

I got her mostly undressed and under the cover. Even slack and ill, she looked beautiful enough to burn my eyes. I watched her for a few minutes, but there wasn't much I could do for the Plague. Just wait for her to wake up. And be somebody else. Somebody who might not remember me.

Most people wouldn't have handled her as much as I did. Although we all carry it around in our bloodstreams all the time, the Plague seems to break out contagiously. Like something pushes people over the edge in waves. I don't think it would have made any difference to me, even if I was susceptible.

After a while, I wandered out into the kitchen for a drink, and spotted the recorder on the table right next to where she'd passed out.

Naturally, I accessed the chip.

"Sam, I wish I didn't have to do it this way. When you get home, I'll be staying at the Holding's Commune. I'd say this to your face if I could, but we'd just end up having another argument, and I'd stay and be miserable even longer. You can't live without the job, and I can't live with it. The job has made you bitter and angry all the time. I just can't take it anymore."

It went on in that vein for a while. It cut off in the middle of a sentence, when she'd been hit by the Plague.

The recorder broke when it bounced off the wall.

After I'd cleaned up the mess, I got on the console and connected to the one at the Holding's Commune. A lot of people lived in groups now, simply for the security of having people around who would know them and take care of them when they got a little fever. Some of them, like the half-dozen in the Holding bunch, sat around in a circle for several hours every night, each taking turns narrating his thoughts and experiences of the day to the others. They vomited their guts all over each other so that their pitiful personalities could be recounted to them when they forgot.

Nora answered the phone. If I knew her, she'd been the one who talked Joyce into moving in with them.

"I just called to tell you Joyce won't be over for a few days," I said. "She's contagious now, and —"

"Who are you?" Nora interrupted.

All of a sudden, I had a pretty good idea of where Joyce got her little fever.

"My name's Sam. Get me somebody who hasn't forgotten recently."

"They're all sick. Everybody." She looked at me desperately. "Please — tell me what you know about me."

"Maybe later," I said, and disconnected.

I didn't want to risk frightening her, so I took off the shoulder holster that held my department-issue .44 and tucked it away in the desk in my study. She woke half a dozen times in the night, and slurred a few sentences at me each time, but her fever stayed high until about four in the morning. I napped intermittently in a chair I brought into the bedroom for the occasion.

Up until the last minute, I didn't know what I'd do with the holocorder that had encircled her wrist for almost three years. Then I found myself unstrapping it and sliding it into my pocket. I lied to myself for a whole five minutes about why I was doing it.

When she woke up, her eyes moved confusedly around the room for a minute, only gradually focusing on me sitting in the chair.

I leaned forward carefully. "How much do you remember?"

She stared at me without comprehension. I screamed under my breath.

"Do you know your name?"

After a second she shook her head. It was beginning to look like a worst-case scenario.

"You've been sick," I said. "Because of it, you'll be confused for a while, and you may have trouble remembering things. But you'll be all right. My name is Sam. You know me. I'll take care of you."

She nodded, and her eyes closed again. I leaned farther out of the chair

and touched my lips to her forehead. The fever had broken.

She slept for a couple more hours, then woke up ravenous and alert. A dozen questions established that she'd retained a lot of functional knowledge, like the ability to read, to use eating utensils, to use all sorts of general socialization skills. But her personal history had vanished.

"What happened, Joyce," I explained over breakfast, "was that on June 4, 1996, a half a dozen ships suddenly appeared strung out equidistant in polar orbit around our planet. Nobody claimed them, and they didn't respond to any signals. When we sent a couple of shuttles to visit them, they easily evaded rendezvous. After a month, they vanished as suddenly as they appeared. Shortly, people began to forget. Some people lost only a month or so out of their lives. Hardly enough to notice. Others lost all memory about a specific subject, say nuclear physics. Not too bad, unless you were a physicist. The severest losses left people like infants."

She'd just about cleaned off her plate for the second time, and didn't ask for more, so I poured us both coffee and continued. "That was bad enough. We figured the aliens had infected us with something, either deliberately or accidentally, but we'd survived it. And a new sort of virus was found floating around in just about everybody's bloodstream. When the second and third waves hit a couple of years later, the Institute for Plague Research was founded. About all they've discovered so far is that they can't cure it or stop it. Anything that kills Amnesia Plague also kills people. Vaccines don't prevent it. Every now and then, most people forget parts of their past, usually working backward from the most recent ones.

"If it's an alien weapon, it almost succeeded. Fifteen or twenty years earlier, before the Computer Revolution geared up, we'd have been ruined by the destruction of knowledge. As it is, we still limp along. Some of us. A lot of what used to be undeveloped countries is wilderness now."

She smiled. "Tell me about you and me."

I took a long sip of coffee. Joyce had known how to come to the point before, and she hadn't lost that ability. "We were married," I finally said. "We were very happy together."

The captain understands about taking care of people who had a little fever, but that's no excuse for making it a vacation. Joyce would be okay at our place for a while. I showed her how to connect the console to the data bases, and she could wander through them, accessing whatever caught her interest. Her holocorder bracelet felt much heavier in my pocket than its actual three ounces.

I hadn't told her about one of the ways that the dandy computers helped us hold civilization together. I used a holocorder to record evidence and testimony, but a lot of civilians had taken to them for another reason, constantly inputting the details and important parts of their lives into them.

Then they could use the home console to link the holocorder memory with a Turing that indexed and extracted information for them. In a couple of weeks of study, they could usually be up and running with a reasonable facsimile of their pre-forgetty lives.

If they chose to.

The Institute demands that people like me and Memory Morris come in for monthly exams. About one in twelve thousand people have never gotten a little fever, and the Institute wants to know why. Congress does, too, so we go whether we want to or not. Like the captain said, we're national resources.

My immunity to Amnesia Plague made me a good cop. The experience of years accumulates until you have a fully developed and functional sixth sense that's invaluable in the job. I was offered inspector long ago, but I can't stay away from the streets. It's my sickness, like others have Amnesia Plague. According to Joyce, it's wiping my original personality as surely as Amnesia Plague does everyone else's.

Memory Morris's immunity made him a hugely successful mobster. He could store vital information too dangerous to record anywhere else. And he had the continuity to develop a sixth sense, too. One that let him keep the young-and-hungries away from the door. But they kept trying, every now and then. And as he got older, he got more paranoid. He had more of himself to lose than most people did.

I made the rounds, letting the word out that I wanted to meet with Memory. It might take a few days, but eventually somebody would slide up beside me and whisper an address or a phone number in my shell-like ear. I made eight more homicides that week.

Most murders aren't premeditated. You just find some drunken idiot standing over Uncle Harry or The Wife, wondering how things got out of control. Most of the killings that are planned are done by people who are cashing in their freebie and don't care if they're caught. The last remaining tiny percentage are by people who want to get away with it. They make incredibly stupid mistakes from pure ignorance, because so often they've forgotten so much. A lot of them don't know about fingerprints. Or polygraphs. It's getting to be like chasing quadriplegics. And it never ends. Most every day on my turf, somebody puts out somebody else's light. Maybe Joyce was right, I thought. Maybe it's time to bag it. But somebody has to clean up the mess, and every now and then, one still came along that gave the old rush.

I lied to Joyce for another couple of days. Basically, I told her about the wonderful first three years we'd had, conveniently omitting the last one, where everything started to slide into the toilet. She believed me. After all, she had no reason not to, and most major forgetties are childishly naive. Not

stupid, mind you. They just don't have the experience to sort out the nice guys from the bastards like me.

The fourth night, she came into the living room, where I'd almost fallen asleep on the couch hide-a-bed.

She leaned over me. Her smooth skin glowed in the dimness cast by the hallway light. "We slept together before I forgot, didn't we?"

I nodded.

"Do you want to again?"

I nodded once more. "When you're ready," I said. "If you decide to stay with me."

"You want me to stay? Even though I don't remember?"

"Enough to lie, steal, and kill for it."

"Do you want to sleep with me tonight?"

"More than anything else."

So we did. She fell asleep in my arms, gentle breath warm against my chest, and I almost remembered how to cry.

Memory Morris owned a couple of warehouses on the edge of town, surrounded by open, short-mown fields. I could see the goonies with binoculars on the roof of one, so it was a reasonable assumption that they'd seen me coming, also.

I pulled my unmarked sedan to a stop in front of one of the empty loading bays. A few seconds after I tapped on the horn, the overhead door's motor ground into action. Three guys with the usual hard, stupid looks on their faces stood just inside the door.

I climbed from behind the wheel, and one of them approached. He gestured for me to raise my arms and submit to a frisk.

"Don't even think about it, junior," I said. "Doesn't Memory train you people any more?"

He looked sullenly at one of the guys standing in the bay. The crew chief nodded.

They escorted me into the warehouse, past bales of no-doubt legitimate materials, through a series of hallways connecting offices in the back, and then up a stairway.

At the end of another short hallway, a steel door was opened for me. They faded back down the stairs as I entered Memory Morris's palatial hideaway. Actually, he'd fixed it up pretty nice. Deep-pile chocolate carpet, artsy-fartsy paintings on the walls, an expensive console and bar in one corner. Tasteful furniture scattered about. There were no windows or doors other than the one I'd entered through. I wondered where the john was.

Memory leaned forward in a high-backed, executive swivel chair behind a desk with a top bare except for a combination phone and mini-console. And, lying a few inches from his outstretched right hand, a Webber .38 Special.

After a second, he relaxed and leaned back in the chair. "Well, well. If it

isn't Super Sam Ryan. The only straight cop in town." He scratched his moustache. "I hear you been looking for me."

He didn't look like a powerful mobster. More like some mousy little accountant that the boys would buy or intimidate into bending the rules for one of their laundry operations. I knew for sure that he'd personally killed half a dozen people. Not because he enjoyed it. He just frightened easily. His goonies thought he was a real tough guy.

"Yeah, Memory. We got such a wonderful relationship going, I feel compelled to drop by every now and then."

We did have a special relationship. We'd disliked each other for longer than anybody else we knew. I first ran into him when I was a street cop on the south side and he was an up-and-coming schmo with the back-room boys who ran the dirty stuff in town. He outlived them all.

Over the years we'd settled into it. In a funny way, we got along fine. We understood each other. Two one-eyed men in the land of the periodically blind.

"Yeah. Remember when you spent a week tracking me down on that Donaldson thing." He laughed. "Only the witness vanished before I walked into the station."

We'd played remember-when for a long time. Sometimes I was the one who started it. Sad. Nobody else could play it with us; they didn't remember when.

"The Institute says you owe them a couple of visits, Memory."

"Screw 'em. They're just pissing upwind anyhow. If they haven't found out by now why you and me don't forget and everybody else does, they never will."

"They can put you somewhere safe for a while if you come in."

I moved behind the bar beside the console and started rummaging around for some ice to put in a glass. I jerked my tie loose and unfastened the top button on my shirt. Memory had the thermostat up higher than I found comfortable. His skinny little body didn't provide much insulation.

"I'm safe here. I'm gonna do business from some Institute facility?" His hand twitched toward the gun unconsciously. "The Houston boys would like that almost as much as if one of their firemen put me away."

He leaned forward in the chair. "Lately, I get rid of one bunch of idiots, and it seems like there's another set right behind them, waiting to step up to bat. Not like back when people learned not to monkey with the buzz saw after it cut up a few of them."

I shucked off my coat and tossed it on the couch. His eyes darted to the holstered pistol, but he stayed relaxed. He knew from way back that he was safe from old straight Sam. He knew the rules I played by. "Yeah, Memory. It ain't like the good old days. The younger generation just ain't got no respect." I found the ice and poured it into a couple of glasses. "You still like Beam?"

He nodded. "It's like they don't care if they live or die." Now I had to find the bottle hidden behind one of the sliding doors set in the wall. "You can see it in the eyes of all the smalltime jerks I run into these days. There's half a dozen open contracts on me. Everybody gets a freebie felony, and they know if they burn me, they get rich off it, and only do time until the Plague gets 'em. Like they got a license to kill. Where's the old moral fiber?"

"It's all going to hell in a hand basket, Memory." I rolled up my sleeves and squatted down to examine one of the lower shelves. "You never did use up your freebie, did you?"

He sounded indignant. "Hell, no. In my business, the whole idea is not to get caught. I'm a professional."

"Yeah. Suppose you did feel a little fever coming on, though, Memory. You thought about what you might do?" I found the bottle on the bottom shelf and stood up.

Memory shrugged. "Naw. I got too much pride to let myself get nailed. There's nothing I want that bad." I popped the bottle open and began to pour. "How about you, Sam?"

"Same here. I got most everything I want without bending for it," I lied.

Suddenly, an intolerably hot blast of air seared the room. The bottle of Beam slipped from my grasp and clattered off the bar's top to the carpet.

"Jesus," I grunted.

"You okay?" Memory asked.

"Ah . . . Feel so hot. Like in a furnace."

I knew I'd made a mistake the second the words left my mouth. It all went wrong then. Memory had been hunted for years by people with a little fever. And I'd hunted him from time to time, too. But I was maybe the only person he allowed armed in his presence, because we both knew how each other played the game. Hell, maybe he needed to have one person he could trust, in a twisted sort of way.

And here I was coming down with a little fever. Changing the rules of the game we'd played for so long. I should have just fallen to the floor and pretended to pass out. Anything but what I actually did. I knew he was keyed up and paranoid. I just couldn't keep from looking to see if he was going for the pistol on his desk.

We locked eyes, and suddenly we were both clawing for our guns. Half-staggering, I ripped mine loose and aimed it in his general direction. I guess I was going to yell at him to freeze, but a slug tore into my shoulder, slamming me back against the wall. The gun bucked in my hand, almost tearing itself out of my flaccid grasp.

I lurched forward into the bar, then dropped flat. After a second, when no more lead came my way, I slithered out from behind the bar and jerked erect, both hands holding the .44 wavering in Memory's direction. I needn't have bothered. He stretched forward over the desk like he was taking an afternoon snooze, except his jaw and half his neck were missing.

I took a step or two toward him. For the first time in eighteen years, I felt nauseous at the sight of a corpse. I knew it wasn't the heat or the hole in my shoulder that did it. It was because he was the first corpse I'd ever created. I'd never shot anyone in or out of the line of duty. Somehow, he looked more mutilated, smelled more awful than all the other deaders I'd ever seen.

I stood over him and ignored the pounding of his goons against the locked steel door behind me. Memory and me, we'd both remembered too much, too well. "Goddam it, Memory," I finally said. "I wasn't going to use up my freebie on you. I already used it on Joyce."

I flicked on the console and called for a squad of uniforms to come rescue me from Memory's impregnable fortress.

They insisted on carrying me to Mercy General in an ambulance. I felt like I could have walked if I had to, but maybe I wasn't making the best decisions by then.

The captain climbed into the rear of the ambulance for one final look-see at me. I dragged the holocorder out of my pocket and handed it to him. "Give this to Joyce. Show her how to use it."

He took it, pokerfaced.

I unstrapped the one on my own wrist. Dropped it to the floor. "Also, I just retired."

"Isn't it a bit early for that, Sam? Maybe you'll remember enough to stay on the job."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"So what are you going to do?"

It hurt to shrug. "Same as everybody else. Start my life over next time I wake up."

I drifted in and out for a day or two. One morning I came wide awake. Weak, but back from wherever I'd been. She watched me gravely.

"Do you know who I am?" she said.

I searched around in the rooms upstairs and didn't notice any large pieces of furniture missing. Which didn't prove anything.

"I know you," I said.

We stared at each other for a long minute.

"Why are you here?" I finally asked. "I lied to you. I stole your memory."

"When I woke up from the Plague, it was good to have somebody near. Somebody who loved me." Her hand crept into mine and squeezed. "I thought somebody should be with you, too."

"Somebody who loves me?"

She smiled. "The Joyce before me loved you, Sam. Even when she thought she had to leave. I don't love you. But I think I will. Is that good enough?"

I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed the soft hammock of flesh

between her thumb and forefinger. "It's the best thing that ever happened to me," I said. "As far as I can remember."



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ABLE BAKER CAMEL
by Richard Wilson
art. Janet Aulisio



The recon team came back to the orbiting research vessel after an overnight circumnavigation of the asteroid Ava. Sergeant Maraffi went to the bridge. There, he handed a recovery bag to the skipper, who asked, "What's in it?"

"No evidence of human habitation," Maraffi said. "But something. I fotofaxed it."

Captain Anson Sheremeta, skipper of RV *Pringle*, opened the bag and fed the fax to his terminal. He asked, "If there's no sign of humanity down there, what do you call this? It's writing and it's in English."

Sheremeta scrolled back to it. "Hardly hurting, Heathcote hurtled heavenward. He'd had his honors. Henceforth he'd have happiness."

"That's English?" Maraffi asked.

"You may be right." Sheremeta fingered the intercom and said, "Hotaling, hurry here." He winked at the sergeant. "Catchy, isn't it? Happily, he'll hustle."

"It was a hollow place under the surface," Maraffi said. "Like a dungeon, maybe. Bare, except for the words. They glowed on a wall. I also —"

"Save it for Ernest Hotaling, psycholinguist extraordinary, inventor of that universal translator, the Hotaling Hoop," the skipper said. "Ernest claims it can unravel anything from anywhere; even make sense of that humming from Betelgeuse. Thinks the hums might be from sentient bees. I'd better feed in a copy of this." He pressed the xmit key. "Relax, Maraffi. Have a drink." He poured two.

Maraffi had listened stoically to the skipper's discourse. He'd heard it all before. Sheremeta, who'd spent most of his life in space, was inclined to be talkative.

"Thanks," the sergeant said. "It was kind of creepy, as if something had died down in that hole. I can imagine it intriguing that mild-mannered oddball, Hotaling."

Life hadn't been kind to Ernest Hotaling lately. A month ago, not long after the *Pringle*'s shakedown cruise in the asteroid belt began, Ernest had an ethergram from his mother, informing him of the death of his father. Of course, it hadn't been possible for him to return to mother Earth for the funeral. Ernest barely had time to assuage his grief at the loss, which included regret that he and his father had not been as close as either of them wished, when a second ethergram arrived, this time from Ganymede. It had come only that morning from his fiancée, Esther. It said Esther was tired of waiting for him and was marrying a faculty member at Ganymede U. A "Dear Ernest" ethergram from Esther.

A yeoman had delivered the ethergram, an open printout from the *Pringle*'s signal center. The yeoman expressed his sympathy even before Ernest had a chance to read it. That's how it had been, too, with the news of his father's death. Ernest supposed that soon everyone aboard would know he'd been jilted. Oh, well, he hadn't been the first in the service to lose a

dear one, one way or another. The very lack of privacy that made Ernest think of the young yeoman not as tactless but as a brotherly commiserator was one of the things that drew the *Pringle*'s crewmen closer together, helped them work as a team.

Ernest wondered whether he knew Esther's unidentified professor. Ernest had earned his degrees in philology and linguistics at GU, with a concentration in putative extrasolar communication. He could have been teaching there himself, presumably married to the fair Esther Harlingen. She wouldn't have to change her initials, he'd pointed out. But instead of matrimony, he'd opted for a long engagement and the rare opportunity to sign aboard the RV *Pringle*, which after its shakedown cruise among the asteroids was to voyage outside the solar system. Obviously, Ernest had to sign up. How else could he do field work in his specialty?

But it was also true that, like his skipper, he preferred the open spaceways to the cavernous confines of the Ganymede colony and the campus some called Grotto Tech — even if it meant a seven-year hitch with no returning in the meantime.

Esther had said she might be there when he got back. That was as positive as she'd been. He wondered what her new beloved's specialty was. He supposed she didn't care about his initials.

Ernest hoped the summons from the bridge had something to do with Ava, the tiny world the crew was mapping. But it could as easily be Captain Sheremeta wanting a few original words to send his wife or daughters on a birthday.

Sheremeta was a spacefaring man from way back; long separations from family were part of the job. He did keep in touch but declined to use Ethercom's numbered list of anniversary, birthday, Valentine, Christmas, and all-purpose greetings. Fortunately, there was Ernest Hotaling. It would be cheaper to pick a pre-coded greeting and ethergram its number than to send a full-rate message of Hotaling's devising. But Ernest's words had more class.

The numbered greetings were intercultural and adaptable to man or beast, and had enough variety to suit the multifarious beings who shared the costs of operating Ethercom. But the skipper had reason to beware of these canned messages. Once, a transmission error resulted in his wife receiving a greeting tailored for husbands at the dreary and man-heavy colony in Titan. It read, "Congratulations! At this point in space and time, I deem you best of all my mates. May your future deportment prevent a change in this rating."

Mrs. Sheremeta never forgave that, and never again did the skipper trust a pre-composed greeting. "Decomposed," he snorted. Hence the reliance on Hotaling, that worthy wordsmith and sometime versifier recalled as he hot-footed it to the bridge.

Maraffi recapitulated his report to the captain, then elaborated on it for

Ernest. "There was something else," the sergeant said. "You know how sometimes a tune gets in your head and you can't get it out? You don't actually hear it, but it's there? Well, without literally hearing it in my ears, I heard: Irma intruded, illegally invisible, isochronic. 'I itch,' Irma intoned." Maraffi looked uncomfortable saying it.

Ernest made a mental note. Meanwhile, his micromike was getting everything down for detailed study later. "You're sure those were the words?" he asked.

"Positive. Heard it over and over. I mean it impinged on my inner ear, or whatever, several times, if you know what I mean."

"That's isochronic — the repetition at intervals."

"Nutty, anyway," Maraffi said. He looked from Ernest to the skipper, who shrugged.

"Maybe not," Ernest said. "First you saw the sentence that was all **h**'s, in those glowing letters you fotofaxed. Then you 'heard,' so to speak, the Irma words that all started with **i**'s."

"Aye, aye," the sergeant said.

"Alphabetic, sequential alliteration so far. Anything else?"

"A lot of unconnected **h** words," said the skipper, scrolling his screen. "You're out of luck if you want a **j**."

Ernest scanned the words. "'Hamlet, hiccup, Hester, hymen, Hyman, hurtle, hurtling' — no rhyme or thread to them, maybe. But there's this." He read, amazed, "Hurtling is also the little one who hurts, who *is* hurt!"

"Doesn't fit the pattern," the skipper said.

"No," Ernest said thoughtfully. "But it could be significant." He asked Maraffi, "You saw nothing other than what you've reported? You didn't hear, or seem to hear, or sense, in any way, anything else?"

"No — Wait, there was something." He dug in his breast pockets. "A kind of pin, like. It was on the ground of the hollow surface, where we found the glowing lettering."

It was more like an elongated map tack, with a blue transparent head, than a pin. It seemed to tingle in Ernest's hand when Maraffi dropped it there, but maybe that was only Ernest tingling with anticipation. He thought ahead to reexamination of the fax and a transcription of the sergeant's debriefing.

The tingle remained as he requested and received Captain Sheremeta's permission to borrow it all for further study.

A flashing light woke Ernest. On and off, in an irregular pattern, the blue light flickered.

Last night in his book-lined cabin, he'd gone over the words a hundred times. He'd listened a dozen times to a playback of Maraffi's oral report. He knew the discovered words by heart, backward and forward. He was intrigued by the repetition of the word *hurtle* in various forms, and its

appearance in the sentence "Hurtling . . . is the little one who hurts. . . ."

Almost as interesting was the way the words were formed. They'd been handwritten on the wall of this cave, in a kind of schoolboy script. But after Maraffi had fotofaxed them, their glow faded, and no trace of them remained on the wall of the underground cubicle.

Ernest had gone to bed exhausted, hoping his subconscious would find a clue he'd overlooked. The strange words chased themselves around in his mind, which held not a thought of Esther as he fell asleep.

Now he concentrated on the flickering light that had awakened him after four hours of sleep. The light flashed at quick intervals, in an unfamiliar pattern.

But the flashes didn't seem random, and Ernest sensed that there was intelligence behind them. He had a feeling that somehow they were coming not from a distance but out of the past.

Then he had it and came fully awake. It was Morse code.

Morse? He'd studied that obsolete telegraphic system, of course, but these days Samuel F. B. Morse was better remembered as an artist. The dots and dashes in Morse code were as much of an anachronism as were pen and ink.

Ernest thrust his musings aside as he realized he had not been paying attention to the message itself. Fortunately, he had a trained memory. He tapped it. Out came j's:

"Jane, joss junky, jeroboam-jarred, jocose, jiggled joyously.

"Jupiter, jactitation, Judas, juxtaposition, julep, jigger."

The first could be read as a sentence, Ernest noted aloud, activating his micromike. The other was a string of perhaps meaningless words, some proper names, each beginning with the tenth letter of the alphabet. All in English, whatever other derivations some of them might have.

As if satisfied that Ernest had got them all, the light transmitted k's:

"King's knight killed kinky Klansman, kissed kittenish kinswoman.

"Ka, kaleidoscope, kvass, kirsch, keg, kinesis."

Ernest got them all down, saying the words aloud. He was silent a moment. Then he said, "So?"

"Message ends," the light signaled, and blinked off.

Ernest now saw clearly where the signals had come from. There was still a faint glow in the head of the blue pin, or map tack, which he had stuck at the bottom of his shaving mirror.

He plucked it out, cupping the thing in his palm. He felt a tingle, as before. "A little pin," he said aloud for the benefit of the mike, although, he thought a little crazily, there just might be another listener. "Richard the Second? A little blue pin."

The rounded head of the pin glowed briefly. "Azure," it spelled out in Morse, then faded again.

Captain Sheremeta asked later, at a more civilized hour, "What did you

mean by Richard the Second?" He'd reviewed the tape, heard Ernest's translations from the Morse, then fastened on something that seemed to offer at least a foothold in reality.

"Act three. 'For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings . . . all murder'd . . . as if this flesh which walls about our life were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus comes at the last and with a little pin bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!'"

"Who bores through the wall?" the skipper asked.

"Death. It's only word association on my part. So far I see no meaning."

"No? Nobody fingering me? Not that I'm a king figure. Hell, I'm not even Noah or Ahab. Just a simple spacefaring man. But why the references to booze? Because I take a drink now and then?"

"References?" Ernest questioned.

"Hiccup. Julep. Jigger. Jeroboam. Kvass. Keg."

"I think you're oversensitive. Jeroboam, for example. He was 'a mighty man of valor' — First Kings, in the Bible."

"There's 'king' again."

"I'll have another look, but I'm sure there's nothing personal," Ernest said.

"Maybe. Tell me about *azure*, the last word in your night letter. Night letters were cheap-rate telegrams, Ernest; I remember my grandfather talking about them."

"Azure is just a shade of blue," Ernest said. "The fairy with the azure hair, in *Pinocchio*."

"Children's literature. That's another of your specialties, isn't it? Anything else?"

"Not offhand."

"How about this? Azure starts with an **a** and a **z** — the alphabet, all there is. **U** and **r** come next: 'you are.' Then comes **e**, for Ernest. 'You are all there is, Ernest.' See anything there?"

"Ingenious," Ernest said. "Are you suggesting I have an intergalactic admirer? It's clever, Skipper, but why would anybody go all around the cosmos to send me a message? And if it's from an alien, why is it in English?"

Sheremeta shrugged. "Why is any of it in English? It makes just enough sense to intrigue an eligible bachelor like yourself. Just kidding, Ernest. I'm sorry about Esther."

Ernest waved it off. "I'll hole up in my cabin. You've given me a few things to think about —"

They were interrupted by a signal from Rosco, the communications officer. "Maraffi's in trouble on Ava. He went back to the hole to see if he'd overlooked anything, and now he can't get out. I can barely hear him through the static. I think he said, 'blue lightning!'"

Ernest hitched a ride on the lander with the team that went to the aid of

Maraffi, who'd gone down alone to the asteroid, against orders.

The sergeant stood at the bottom of a small pit, at the mouth of a tunnel that even a small person would have to stoop to get into. Maraffi was not small. His naba helmet made him look even bigger.

"Are you hurt?" Ernest asked him.

"Nah. But when I try to go in the tunnel — watch." He bent almost double as if to enter. Sparks crackled across it like a web, playing on the helmet of his nonatmospheric breathing apparatus. "Ouch. I get a shock when I try."

"Don't try. Come on up," Ernest recommended.

The blue sparking ceased.

"Can't do that, either." Maraffi crouched to activate his kicker boots so they'd propel him upward, but when he was halfway up, a blue web formed across the top of the pit and Maraffi fell back. "Damn blue lightning de-powers the boots."

The upper web vanished.

"I'll come down," Ernest said.

The corporal in charge of the rescue unit asked, "Do you think that's wise?"

"I have a hunch," Ernest said. He hopped into the pit. Nothing happened. "Now you go up, Sergeant. Humor me."

There was no interference as Maraffi's boots thrust him up and out.

"So far so good," Ernest said. "I'm going into the tunnel." He stuck his head into the opening. Again nothing happened, and he withdrew. "I have an idea something or somebody wants me here instead of you, Sergeant. Nothing personal, I'm sure. Give me about ten minutes."

"If you're not back then, I go in after you — sparks or no sparks," Maraffi informed Ernest.

The tunnel soon made a right-angle turn, and Ernest was in darkness. He removed the blue-headed map tack from where he'd stuck it on the flap of an outer pocket. As he held it over his head, it began to glow, producing a steady light. The tunnel ended a few yards ahead in the small square chamber Maraffi had described, a rough cavelike formation measuring about ten feet on a side.

Ernest said softly, "Well, I'm here. Now what?"

There was a faint sound. Despite the smallness of the room, it seemed to come from far away. A sound of laughter? He could not be sure. But then a female voice said, "Less lonely, lamb. Libation. Libido. Longitudinal lassitude. Loving laughter."

He was transfixed by the voice. It spoke softly, clearly. He tried to place the accent, but that eluded him. He could tell only that English was not her native tongue. Yet the words she spoke, meaningless as they might be, were well enunciated, properly pronounced. The voice stopped. He wanted to hear, and record, more.

"Who are you?" he asked.

There was a long silence, then the voice said, "Tweena."

A tiny light, twin to his, came on across the small cave. It showed no one. After another pause the voice continued, as if from a distance greater than the width of the chamber, "Mindless my master meanders, maunding. Mendacity! Molehills mount."

"Where are you? Are you a projection?"

Another pause.

"We reach n in your alphabet." Her voice sounded close. "N for 'notes,' which it is time we exchanged — no?"

"Tell me about yourself. You speak English well. Your vocabulary is extensive, if idiosyncratic. What are you trying to say?"

"Seven minutes, Mister Hotaling," Maraffi radioed. "Three more and I go in."

"I'm okay. I'll call if I need you."

Maraffi's voice crackled through static. "Can't hear you, sir. Are you in trouble? I'm going in now!"

"I'm all right. Stay where you are." But he doubted he was reaching the sergeant.

He turned back to the light. "Tweena," he began.

Her impersonal voice droned. "Not now numb, nor nauseated, Nimrod neared Nirvana!"

"Nuts," Ernest said. "Not that again."

Tweena's light lay on the floor of the chamber, where it glowed long enough for Ernest to pick it up. He stuck both pins in his pocket flap.

Then the rescue party reached the man whose least desire was to be rescued.

Tweena's voice was no longer heard. Whatever communication had been established was now broken.

"Are you all right, sir?" inquired Sergeant Maraffi.

"I was," said Ernest.

Ernest went to the ship's library, which he unwillingly called it. Actually, it was a computer terminal in a room off the message center. The terminal was linked to data banks in Ganymede, which had connections to vaster storehouses of information on mother Earth. It was a library without a book.

Only once had Ernest been to Earth. His parents took him there as a sixteenth-birthday present. That birthday fell just before he matriculated at Ganymede and coincided with his parents' completion of their twenty-year tenure at Grotto Tech.

They were going home for good, retiring in the homeland. They arranged one-way passage for two and a round trip for their son who, after all, was a native 'Medean.

Despite Earth's general air of decay, he found the old planet fascinating.

The last acreage of open country his parents remembered had given way to construction when they took him to the old home town, but it would have meant little to him anyway. The cities were more exciting to him, in their built-up run-down complexity, than he had expected. Having paid visits to the miniaturized recreations of such long-gone phenomena as the Grand Canyon, the Amazon, and the Himalayas, he returned again and again to the cities. He loved the theaters, the museums, and the sports arenas, but in moderation. His passion was the incredible Greater Metropolitan Public Library.

This venerable institution, formerly the New York Public, had made the decision more than a century earlier to turn its back on computerization and to concentrate solely on books that could be held in the hand and read with the naked eye. There were enough other institutions for those who liked their information byte-sized.

Ernest wandered in a happy daze among the old-fashioned volumes, charmed by the variety of their shapes, thicknesses, and type styles, and by the smell of their paper and binding. At the beginning of each visit, he spent half an hour roaming the stacks, reading spines, taking down random volumes for the sheer luxury of holding them, inhaling their obsolete aromas, and delightedly scanning an opening sentence here, a last paragraph there. On his final visit a tear of joy and regret fell from his eye to an open page. He felt no shame. That bit of himself was now enshrined forever in a book in a library along with other readers' leavings. A fragment of dribbled cornflake stuck to one page. He had seen other pages personalized by tobacco ashes, mustard stains, and a bit of penciled marginalia that he deplored but adored. It read, **WHAT ROT!**

Ernest savored the memory of his long-ago visit to Earth's old-fashioned library of genuine books. Now, more than a decade later, he sat at the *Pringle's* "library," unable to get through to *Ganymede*. CKTS BY, he was told, and wandered to the fo'c's'le. In the nose of the ship, he stared moodily into deep space.

He pondered the form and meaning of the messages he had now memorized. The first words and sentences, emblazoned on a wall in a cave beneath the surface of the little world they were mapping, began with **h**. Then the **i** words "heard" by Maraffi inside his skull — telepathically?

Then back to an **h** word, *hurtling*, in a sentence that was not all **h**'s. *Hurtling*, a homonym or homograph, a word spelled and pronounced the same but with different meanings; but not a homophone, pronounced the same but spelled differently, or a heteronym, spelled the same but with different sounds. *Hurtling*, a little one who hurts.

Were the messages child's play? Certainly they were wordplay, somebody — something? — having fun with the language.

Then the **j** and **k** words, transmitted in Morse Code, virtually a dead language. Were these messages from another time, from a person trapped in the

past?

The latest communication, the word *azure*, had struck the captain as a sort of rebus, a puzzle.

Was there a girl named Tweena? A machine simulating such a voice, alliterating away like crazy — was a madman communicating? — but occasionally making some sense, voicing a kind of yearning as it spoke of such human matters as loneliness and love, libido and laughter.

Was somebody telling a story? The characters so far: Heathcote, hurtling heavenward. Irma, an intruder — an alien? Jane, a joyous jiggler. Nimrod, seeker of beatitude. A handful of extras: Hamlet, Hester, Hyman, and Judas.

Ernest saw no meaning in any of them, unless Tweena was Heathcote, hurting as she hurtled.

Now he was getting silly, Ernest told himself. But shouldn't he permit himself a little playfulness? Tweena, a Heathcote or not, had a sense of fun, as when he — or she, or it — interspersed words that implied tippling and that caught the self-conscious ear of the captain.

So far the mysterious signal sender — ignoring communications officer Rosco and his signal center — had indulged in a code, in alphabetizing and alliteration, possibly in a rebus. Surely, there was more to come. Possibly an anagram or an acrostic. Maybe even a palindrome, where words and sentences ran backward as well as forward. Like the classic "Madam, I'm Adam." Like the palindromic planetoid Ava. Like his personal favorite, "Kay, a red nude, peeped under a yak."

He was enjoying the picture this conjured up in his mind when Captain Sheremeta joined him in the fo'c's'le and peered into space over his shoulder.

"Getting inspiration from the infinite?" Sheremeta asked him.

"Not a peep," said Ernest.

"Come help me report to Fleet."

In his comfortable quarters the skipper poured two good-sized drinks. "If we had a yardarm, the sun would be over it," he said. "I've told Fleet only that we found some artifacts and are studying them. If I admitted that we were up to our butts in alphabet soup, we'd never hear the end of it."

Ernest savored his drink. It had been an exhausting day, from the time the first Morse message woke him after four hours of sleep. "Do you have to report again soon?"

"Not really. But a little unofficial brainstorming won't do us any harm."

Ernest took out his mike, but the skipper frowned and he put it away again. "Right," Ernest said. "Off the record. You don't mind if I ramble? I'm not your orthodox thinker."

"Ramble away. I'll freshen our drinks."

"There's a lady and she talks. That's two new things. Whereas the earlier Morse messages could have been recordings, I was holding a conversation

down there in the hole."

"Were you?"

"You heard the tapes, the voice. It — she answered my questions."

"Did she? You got what you took to be a reply to one of several questions. The others were not answered; at least what you heard was not responsive."

"I asked her name and she told me Tweena."

"Why assume that's a name? They could be two nonsense syllables uttered by chance after your question. The tapes are full of words that make no sense. 'Molehills mount,' she said — if there is or was a she. Are you making mountains out of molehills, Ernest?"

"Do you mean the whole thing could have been prerecorded? That's possible, of course."

Every so often Ernest remembered how young and inexperienced he was in actual field work. He hadn't entirely learned not to jump to conclusions, even tentative ones, although it was okay to do that if, in accord with accepted academic practice, the conclusions were labeled theories.

Ernest recalled his first introduction to Captain Sheremeta, who he had assumed to be of Japanese ancestry. The younger man, perhaps rudely, stared at the other's face, looking for telltale signs in the eyes and skin. As it happened, Sheremeta's background was not Japanese but Ukrainian.

"I reacted unprofessionally," Ernest said now. "It seems I reached a conclusion not justified by facts."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," the skipper said. "We're just talking here. Actually, I've broken the brainstorming rule about speaking only positively."

"I still feel like a dope," Ernest said. "But it must seem to you that there's intelligence somewhere behind those words. Somebody, somewhere, somewhen, put them on tape, knew Morse code, possibly spoke to me live."

"Absolutely," said the skipper.

"Now you're humoring me — but let's go on. I heard the voice as that of a girl. A subteenager, age 11 or 12, communicating in a language not native to her. I have a feeling she — it — will speak to me again."

"Only to you? Why didn't she talk to Maraffi? Sorry; that's negative. Maybe she'll talk to somebody else, too. There's a whole shipload of us she could talk to — even me."

"Sure she could," Ernest said.

"Now you're humoring me. Wait — those pins in your shirt. One is flashing."

As Ernest reached for the pin, it began to talk. "Oceans of openness," said a girlish voice.

"I heard that," the skipper said. "Don't touch it, Ernest. Go on, Tweena."

"Ordinarily only octopi oviparate."

"Say something sensible to the captain," Ernest said.

"Ouzo ossified Osgood; others onwarded."

"Please!" said Ernest.

"Onward, over obstacles."

"That's better."

"Over. Out."

"That's too bad," the skipper said as the flashing stopped.

"Tweena?" Ernest called softly. There was no answer. "You heard all that?" he asked the captain.

"I heard. I even participated. Pity I made you put your mike away."

Ernest looked guilty. "I turned it on again as I put it in my pocket. What do you think now?"

"It's a girl, all right. A young one. I speak as a man with daughters. She might even have been talking to us. But she wasn't necessarily responding, except —"

"Except what?"

"She got in another of those digs when you asked her to speak sensibly. 'Ouzo ossified Osgood.' Ouzo is a Greek drink."

"Sure. And ossified is a quaint old word for being drunk. You don't take that personally, do you?"

"I will if you prove she was being responsive," the captain said. "But then it'll be worth it."

"She sounds like an abecedarian," Ernest said. "That's a novice, a beginner, in one meaning. Somebody who's just mastered the alphabet as a step to learning a language."

"She's pretty far along, judging by some of the words she used. I don't know half of them."

"You exaggerate, of course. It could be an alien's way to learn our language, browsing through the alphabet, letting one thing lead to another, the way I do with books —" Ernest stopped short, looking guilty.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about those books," Sheremeta interrupted. "You keep smuggling them aboard, or having them shipped in, disguised as expendables. This must stop, Ernest. We have load limits, and books are heavy."

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best."

"Miniature books are collectible, I hear. Good investments."

"I'm not a collector or investor. I need my books for reference."

"Getting your facts from a machine is frustrating, I know, but everybody made a sacrifice when he signed on this voyage." The skipper poured another round. "I do enjoy these little chats with you, Ernest" — he raised his glass — "especially because you never point out that my private grog could be considered a form of contraband."

"I do my best, sir."

"No one can ask more. Drink up. Abecedarians, now. They were an Anabaptist sect in the 1500s. They opposed learning; didn't even want people to learn the ABC's."

"Yes, sir," said Ernest, surprised.

"I heard that from my wife. She sort of studies religion to balance off my faults. And do you know the 119th Psalm has an abecedarian form?"

"I hadn't heard that. How does it go?"

"Let's look it up."

"Where, Captain?"

"I have a Bible over my bunk here. Present from my wife. I see you smiling — It's a book, isn't it? My two sins: booze and a contraband Bible. We'll be sure not to tell on each other, won't we?"

"Yes, sir."

The skipper read from his King James Version. "Aleph, beth, gimel. A Hebrew letter atop each section. The oldest phonetic alphabet, I'd say. I remember Able Baker Charlie. I know aleph means ox and beth is house. What's gimel?"

"Camel," Ernest said. "The Greek letter gamma evolved from the Phoenecian sign for gimel, a camel. Alpha, beta, gamma. Able Baker Camel, if you like."

"Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. Odd what stays with you. Matthew, New Testament."

"The Koran says no impious person shall enter Heaven till a camel pass through the eye of a needle."

"Same thing in the Bible, almost. Matthew again." The captain skimmed through the 119th Psalm. "Verse 19 — 'I am a stranger in the Earth. . . .'"

"Sounds like me," Ernest said. "A stranger on Earth. Motherland or not, I'd never go there again if they'd move that library to the colonies."

"Sounds like our friend Tweena. A stranger to Earth and Earthpeople, yearning to be accepted. But let's not be sentimental. You haven't lost your objectivity in that glass, have you, Ernest?"

"It slipped a little back there when I dreamed up a sweet young girl. It could be a fiend from the depths of Hell, for all I know."

The skipper's terminal buzzed and the screen lit up. "Rush personal Hotaling via Sheremeta," it preambled. Then: "Alternately baying, caterwauling, disrobing, Esther fought gloriously high in Jason's keep, leaving most numb, others petrified, Quist raped, Sebastian truncated. Utterly victorious, woman, xenophobic, yondered zestfully."

The words blazed defiantly.

"Copy, copy!" Ernest cried, and the skipper pressed a key.

Four more words appeared: "Signed your fiend Tweena."

The skipper copied that too, and the machine shut itself off.

"With a little pin," Ernest said later to himself, alone in his cabin.

The pin was symbolic. Some entity was using it in several ways. It was a stylus, an instrument of communication, a pen that wrote, the needle of a phonograph or an encephalogram or a seismograph. Or of a tattoo artist. It

was a way to needle him by using the name of his ex-beloved, Esther, in that unsettling a-to-z construction that had homed in on the captain's own terminal, bypassing the message center. A needle that hurt in its implication that the sender knew all about the recipient; a hurt as sharp as that from the needle-like spine of a cactus, and he was the hurtling, the one who was hurt. And it was a needle's eye that two holy books spoke of as an obstacle for a camel, a gimel, a ship of the desert.

The skipper had said, "My grandfather collected old talking machines and the needles he needed to play the old cylinders and disks. There were even cactus needles they sharpened each time so as not to injure the delicate grooves of the early LPs."

Ernest recalled that Maraffi had spoken of a pin but that he thought of a map tack that might guide him across unknown territory to the mysterious communicator called Tweena. The image of a young girl persisted despite Ernest's attempt to keep things in perspective. A stylus, he thought again, which if properly used would play the record of her life — of *their* lives, if others also hoped to surmount obstacles to clear and meaningful communication.

The a-to-z message was anything but clear. He could find no meaning in his mental picture of a naked Esther, screaming and slashing her way through an army of men to the top of an ancient castle. Having reached the top, this superwoman, defiler of men, savoring her victory, took off for parts unknown. Having escaped, whither would she yonder?

To get the picture of the liberated she-cat Esther out of his mind, he covered the name in the 26-word paragraph with another having the same number of letters — Elinor — and restudied the words. Their arrangement was clever, of course, but was the result more than a mere diversion?

Ernest recalled the forerunners of the paragraph. Writing sentences or verses whose words all began with the same letter had been scholarly pastimes, devices of bygone poets. Shakespeare, Rostand, Coleridge, and Swinburne had indulged in them. Would an alien consider such language an introductory formality, such as "Dear Sir or Madam," "Greetings," or "Now Hear This"?

It went further. The stuff had a showoff air about it, like the curious Lope de Vega novel that never used the letter **e**, or Lord Holland's work that, conversely, omitted all vowels except **e**. Actually, de Vega had written five novels, each avoiding one of the vowels. The result was called a lipogram, from the Greek *leipo*, "omit."

Then there was Ernest Vincent Wright, whose "Gadsby" in 1939 was a 50,000-word lipogram without an **e**. Holland's **e**-only work, "Eve's Legend" of 1824, was a mere page and a half long. Univocalic was the word for such a curiosity.

"Excrement!" said Ernest, uttering a univocalism of his own. None of this was getting him anywhere.

But he had missed following up on something. He backed up his thoughts. Something about an alien. How an alien would think, after relatively brief exposure to another language. Up to now Ernest had been thinking chiefly in terms of an Earthperson, or a terrestrially descended person, as author of the gibberish he'd received. But there was also a case to be made for the sender being an alien, stumbling through the complications, contradictions, and traps of the English language.

In that case it might be possible to bring the Hotaling Hoop to bear on the problem. Ernest was not fond of the nickname for his Rosetta-like method of transliterating alien tongues into English. He'd have preferred something more dignified. Others called it other things, like Transtongue, Simple-speak, Literator, or even Mother because it rendered alien speech into the mother tongue.

The Hotaling Hoop evolved from a number of steps Ernest had taken to compare a new language, or its sounds or symbols or whatever was available, with the many already known. His name for the process kept changing as he worked out the various functions in counterrotating circles of syllables, known and unknown. Finally, he arrived at the concept of a modified lingua franca, extraterrestrial version. Translated into basic English and punched into paper tape on an old-fashioned Telex before it went into the computer, it came out as Linguateletext and then Lingtext and finally LTX.

A goodly number of intergalactic grunts, hums, and pulsations, reduced to basics, had rolled around in the Hotaling Hoop, but so far it had made no sense of any of them.

Ernest still thought of the device as the LTX, but he had pet names for it — or her.

He sat at his obsolescent but beloved pilot model and fed in a tape that transmitted all of Tweena's words. He saw the words appear on the screen and knew that at the same time they were spinning dizzily around in the counterrotating hoops.

The hushed sounds made by the thin metal circles and the other machinery were lulling ones. Ernest waited, prepared to make interim notes.

Minutes, elongated by Ernest's impatience, went by with no result. He spoke aloud to the machine, using the pet names: "Speak to me, Eltie. I gave you input; give me some output. Come on, old girl."

The machine continued to whir, but nothing new appeared on the screen.

"Say something, Eltie dear. I'll commission you if you do. From LTX to Lieutenant X, spelled out in full. A field promotion, on the spot."

The wheels went round and round, whispering monotonously. Ernest fought to stay awake.

"You're not tempted? Content to remain a noncom? Or are you simply non compos today?"

The trouble may have been with him rather than with the Hoop. It was likely that Eltie was dutifully comparing the transmissions of Tweena with

the strictly nonverbal extrasolar manifestations. If so, it was obvious why she was getting nowhere.

He got her to roll her hoops in a different direction — within the solar system — and gave her clues a bit at a time, although he still didn't know what he was looking for.

He fed in Tweena's a-to-z paragraph with the instruction SEARCH AND SIMULATE.

Eltie adapted quickly. She printed out a list of men's names, Aaron to Zenas, and of women's names, Abigail to Zuleika.

She spouted the old airmen's alphabet — Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, through X ray, Yankee, Zulu.

She dredged up a compendium of little-known literary names ranging from Alexis Aar (b. 1853) to Ulrich Zwingle (b. 1484).

She gave him

An Austrian army, awfully arrayed,
Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade.
Cossack commanders cannonading come,
Dealing destruction's devastating doom. . . .

It took Ernest half the alphabet to recognize the old chestnut, "The Siege of Belgrade," and he used the break key to interrupt as the lines marched inexorably and alliterately toward the z's.

Eltie had become moody and sullen, Ernest felt, and increasingly bookish in her responses.

Bookish! He never thought he'd use the word in a derogatory sense. But that's what she was being — literal-minded, giving him chapter and verse, relaying more than he cared to know.

He fed her "abecedarian," and she responded with "a sect founded in 1520 by Nicholas Stork, a weaver of Zwickau, whose members were also called the Zwickau prophets."

The repetition of Zwickau triggered another train of thought inside Eltie, and she began a readout of terrestrial place names — Aachen, Aalborg, Aargau. . . . Sure of her ground, she had raced past Aberystwyth without a falter and seemed determined to gallop on till she reached Zwickau again.

Sighing, Ernest shut her up — off — with his break key and the good-bye letters GB.

He shook himself out of his disappointed torpor and, stretching the kinks out of his back, went to his cabin.

Ernest stretched out on his bunk and fell into an uneasy sleep in which he dreamed of books and camels and palindromes.

The books were in the Greater Metropolitan Public Library, whose initials, GMPL, turned into gimel, a camel being ridden by Richard Nixon. From the camel saddle flew two pennants with the words STEPFATHER OF SPACE PROGRAM and FRIEND TO ASTRONAUTS. The historic president was reciting the palindrome "A man, a plan, a canal: Panama" on his way across

the North African desert to Suez, an anagram of Zeus, as in the palindrome "Zeus was deified, saw Suez."

This burst on Ernest as a revelation and, still in his dream, he looked up to where an asteroid named Ava hung in the heavens. There dwelt Lieutenant X, with whom it was essential that he share this exquisite knowledge. Ernest beseeched her, "Flee to me, remote elf!"

But the machine, now an attractive uniformed humanoid, was berating Captain Sheremeta, saying "Red rum, sir, is murder." The skipper admonished her in return, saying, "Live not on evil, madam, live not on evil."

Ernest woke, sweating, the words echoing in his mind. It took a moment for him to remember that he was in his bunk in a spacecraft, and a little longer to swing his legs over and sit up.

As he sat, the blue-headed pins he had again stuck at the base of his shaving mirror began to glow. The mirror became a screen on which he saw fuzzy holographic images. They sharpened into a domestic scene, a girl of 11 or so and a benevolent-looking old man sitting at a bare table. They were human, but their foreheads were sloped and they were furry like cats.

"Lessons enough for today, Tweena," the man said. "But we shall continue to converse in English. We must be proficient in their tongue if we are to be sponsored by these people of a far time and place."

"Allow me one more exercise, Grandfather," she said. Ernest thumbed on his micromike as she singsonged:

"All affably attend
"My mythic mourn,
"Perhaps polydysiacally panting,
"Halting, however hurtfully,
"Inching inexorably, inutile,
"Gaily, gaudily grouped.
"Otherwise opalescent, omnipresent,
"Ululating, urging ubiety.
"Remorse runs riot
"In interminable iconography."

"Excellent, my dear," the man said. "Was that spontaneous, or did you put much preparation into it?"

"I made it up as I went along, except that it is of course an acrostic. As one can plainly see, the initial letters spell *amphigouri*."

Ernest Hotaling had not plainly seen that, having been occupied in noting down all the words and puzzling over a couple he was not familiar with. At least he knew *amphigouri* was a verse that made no sense, if indeed Tweena's composition could be called verse.

"You are ahead of me with two words, Granddaughter. Polydysia — ah, I see now that it means having a great thirst. Another playful tribute to Captain Sheremeta. But ubiety?"

"It applies to us, in a negative way. Ubiety is the state of being in a place

— whereness, if you will. Unfortunately, whereness is what we lack, marooned as we are in this place that is timeless and spaceless."

Ernest pondered the coincidence that the words the man mentioned were precisely those he had been unfamiliar with. It was as if Tweena and her grandfather, "in interminable iconography," spoke, or continued to speak, for his benefit.

The grandfather was saying: "I fear I shall succumb to inubietry before long. Like that wondrous beast, the camel, I have drawn on stored-up sustenance. But after ten thousand years I fear that my time here is dwindling. We are so near our goal, we relics of our ancient civilization, that I fear I shall not reach it without returning to limbo for a long period of renewal. You, the younger, must prepare to carry on alone."

"Nay, Grandfather," the girl said. "Your greater knowledge is needed. You shall have some of my overabundant sustenance. That will enable you to complete the task we set for ourselves so long ago when we achieved this asteroidal orbit of the eternal sun, here to wait noncorporeally until, as foretold, the Second Transfer, to recorporeality, can be made. I rejoice that now we are at the threshold of that once inconceivable goal."

Ernest found their speeches informative but long-winded. Again he felt that the old gentleman and his precocious granddaughter expected to be overheard — might even have arranged for him to eavesdrop on them.

Suspicion had begun to outweigh sympathy when general quarters sounded. He heard Captain Sheremeta cry, "Stand by your stations. A bandit has materialized in wardroom 2. It may have killed Sergeant Maraffi."

Ernest's emergency station was the bridge. He rushed there, noting as he left his cabin that the scene in the mirror was fading. He grabbed the blue pins on the way.

"What's the bandit, Captain?" he asked as he arrived at the bridge, and Sheremeta gestured toward a battery of screens.

On one of them, Ernest saw a creature that could have been a museum reconstruction of a pre-Classical era soldier, garbed for battle. It stood not quite five feet high, he estimated, and was powerfully built. The words *creature* and *built* crossed his mind because the figure stood unmoving, as if part of an instructional diorama. It had a leather helmet. Thick skins protected its trunk. It wore sandals and carried a shield and a spear.

Maraffi lay on his side on the wardroom floor, his face hidden from view. He didn't move. There was no sign of a wound.

Another screen showed the passageway outside the wardroom. Half a dozen of the *Pringle's* battle crew stood ready at the door, stun weapons drawn, awaiting orders.

All at once there were two intruders in the room. The second materialized at the side of the first, an exact duplicate. Neither moved.

Maraffi did, though. He rolled over and sat up, dazed. When he saw the

others, he reached for his weapon.

"Don't shoot!" the captain cried. "Are you all right, Maraffi?"

The sergeant felt here and there. "I tingle all over, but nothing's broken, Captain. Who are they?" He eyed the ancient warriors, who continued to stand motionless.

"Did you see how the first one got in?"

"He sort of loomed up next to me — must have knocked me out."

"The other materialized just as you came to. Are they breathing? Are they human?"

Maraffi let his gun arm drop. "They look human." With his other arm he reached to touch. "Ow. I got a shock. They're not breathing that I can see." He passed a hand before their eyes. "They're not focusing, either — Did you see that? Now there are four!"

Two more had materialized directly behind the others amid electric crackling. Maraffi stepped back.

"Do they look like projections?" the captain asked. "Holograms?"

Four more materialized to one side of the others, displacing a metal chair that hurtled into a bulkhead in a shower of sparks.

"Is that what happened to me? No wonder I was knocked out. Not projections, no. They're solid. It's getting crowded in here!"

Sheremeta ordered those outside the door to stand easy and told Maraffi to open up to them. The number of ancient warriors doubled again, pushing through an inner wall to the galley and upsetting an urn of hot coffee. Now there were sixteen.

On the bridge Hotaling asked, "May I suggest something, Captain?"

"By all means."

"Tweena!" Ernest said sharply. "Come in on screen five."

It lit up obediently.

"I didn't do that," said Rosco, the communications officer.

"Never mind," the skipper said. "Let's watch."

The image of the young girl appeared on the screen. "Greetings, Ernest," she said. "I feel I know you well."

"How many of these, uh, old soldiers are there altogether, Tweena?"

"Two thousand three hundred, approximately."

"They can't keep coming," Ernest said. "There's not enough room."

"Thirty-two here now, sir," Maraffi reported from the wardroom. "If they double again, we've had it."

Another voice was heard. The old man appeared behind the girl, saying, "My granddaughter has made her point. Haven't you, my dear?"

"Yes. You will see no more of our troops at this time. I merely demonstrated our need," Tweena commented.

"Explain to them, Tweena," her grandfather said. They sat as Ernest had seen them before. "Perhaps Captain Sheremeta will hear you out."

The skipper said, "Empty our wardroom, and I'll listen till the cows come

home."

"Your language is fascinating, Captain." She clapped her hands. The ancient warriors vanished from the wardroom.

"They're gone," Maraffi confirmed. "Left a mess, though. Coffee spilled all over the place —"

"All right, Sergeant," the skipper interrupted. "Now, Tweena, tell me —"

But her image had vanished and so had her grandfather's. Their screen was blank and silent.

"Tweena!" Ernest called. There was no answer.

"What's the girl up to now?" the skipper asked. "I said I'd listen."

"Probably she's tired," Ernest said. "That demonstration must have taken a lot of energy out of her."

"Her shenanigans are taking a lot out of me," Sheremeta said. He turned to his communications chief, who was energetically twisting dials and flicking switches. "Can't you get her back, Rosco?"

"I'm not having any luck."

"I can see that. Well, work on it. I'll be checking out the wardroom."

When the skipper had left, Rosco told Ernest, "I wasn't really trying. I didn't want to risk getting the warriors back instead."

"You mean we can't contact her at all?"

Rosco shook his head. "Never could. They contacted us when they



wanted to. If you have any ideas —”

Absently, Ernest fingered the blue-headed pins stuck in the jacket of his uniform.

“Well, yeah,” Rosco said. “They might help.”

“What? Oh, these. I was thinking of trying the LTX.”

“Why not that, too? But not from here. Come to my station.” His station, the signal center, had a view of Ava and other asteroids against a starry background. “Do you think they’re in that hunk of rock that tried to swallow Maraffi?”

“I believe they’re in a noncorporeal state, as they informed me in my cabin. They could be anywhere.”

“Maybe we can get through to them, even if they don’t want to talk to us.”

“How?” Ernest asked.

“Give me the pins while you raise the Hoop on my terminal.” Rosco swept charts off a map table and set the blue pins into its wired, spongy surface. “The skipper still likes paper charts. I think unrolling them turns him on.”

“What do you want the LTX for?” Ernest asked. “Their English, goofy as it may be, comes through in clear speech.”

“Sure. But we can use the LTX as a direction finder. Set her at proxima sweep, and see what happens.”

Ernest set it up. “What are you doing with the pins?”

“Blue lightning, you and Maraffi claimed. That’s electrical. If the pins have lost their own power, we’ll feed them some of ours. Then when Eltie homes in on the little miss, we’ll have two points here and a third out there. We activate, triangulate, locate.”

“Turn on the lightning then.”

As Rosco turned on the power from his console, the pin heads on the map table glowed blue. Outside, the apparatus discerned a third speck of light glowing in the distance. Its image on the terminal tinted the screen into a blue effulgence.

“There’s something!” Ernest cried. “Wherever there is.”

Rosco was busy with his own instruments, muttering in concentration. “It’s somewhere,” he said. “I mean it’s not limbo; that would be oblivion with no physical existence. For them, as we know, limbo is a state of body and mind, a retreat where they can renew their energies at intervals. Only in that way could they have paced themselves to survive for 10,000 years or more.”

Rosco paused. He looked up, bemused. “What made me say that? It’s more than I know or could guess.”

“I’m getting it, too,” Ernest said. “I don’t see anything, but I have a sense of knowing what someone is thinking.”

He recalled having thought of the blue pin as a stylus that might play the record of Tweena’s life. Then Ernest began to get impressions — or pic-

tures.

Rosco spoke. "That was the Ice Age, 10,000 years ago."

Ernest heard him as if across a vast distance.

"I see a nomadic people who fled the glaciers." So Rosco was also receiving impressions now.

Ernest was well aware that he was sitting at a terminal in a research vessel in the asteroid belt and that it was the 21st century. But he felt disembodied, suspended above a panoramic scene from mankind's past. He had a gods'-eye view of one of civilization's beginnings.

These ancient people, being nomads, were encumbered with few physical artifacts of the kind prized by people who stayed in one place. The nomads' racial treasures were their memories, forever fresh, permanently stored in the minds of succeeding generations.

Now Ernest was having a split vision. He could see the people on one of their migrations. They were human, with downy hair that covered their cat-like features. Simultaneously, he saw Tweena lying asleep, somehow suspended in space and time, and realized he was both outside and inside her, observing her primitive ancestors through racial memories stored in a corner of her mind. Tweena herself was one of them. She appeared to be quite pettable — He put the thought away.

Primitive probably wasn't the right word for these pioneer people. Prehistoric? That was true in the sense that they had no written history. But mankind's progress wasn't necessarily frozen during the Ice Age. South of the glaciers they had their comforts. They had portable fires and other luxuries, like fur coats.

Rosco was making similar observations through his own mental window into the past. He spoke softly, as if to himself. Ernest suspected he was making a voice recording of his impressions.

"A people with little artistic craft and no writing," Rosco murmured. "But with an excellent language, older even than the Arabic the serpent spoke in Eden. A superior language developed to such proficiency by the nomads that those riding herd at the rear could communicate with the pathfinders far to the fore."

"Telepathy," Ernest said.

"What? Something like that, probably. At first only the priests had this ability. But soon all of them spoke that way, from mind to mind. Thus, their priests had to find new talents if they were to maintain their position of advantage. With the help of their gods, they learned to concentrate their thoughts. Later they drew on the mental powers of their fellow nomads to move small objects, then bigger ones, and finally things as big as themselves and bigger. Eventually, the priests were able, almost instantly, to move themselves from place to place, decorporeating at one place and recorporeating at the other. Gradually, the distances increased."

"Matter transportation," said Ernest. "You and I see different things, but

they overlap."

"I seem to be learning their history through the grandfather's mind," Rosco observed.

"Doesn't it make you feel like a Peeping Tom?"

"Actually, no," Rosco said. "Captain Sheremeta informed me that you claimed they used the blue pins to watch us. Now we're using the pins to find out more about them. It's only fair."

"Go on, Rosco. What else do you see?"

"The distances they could cover became greater. Eventually, they could transfer not only people and their personal possessions but their herds as well."

Rosco paused, staring at the pins glowing atop the map table.

"Then the priests made a mistake."

For a brief moment Ernest thought he'd heard Rosco say the words, but then realized he'd read them on the screen of the terminal. He beckoned to Rosco who, still mute, went to his side.

The words on the machine sped along: "At the time of a terrible drought, wherever in the known land the priests transported them it was the same. Drought and desolation, with their stores running out. Surely, they all would die unless they could travel to a land beyond the ones they knew. So, with the gods' guidance, the priests worked it out."

The men looked at each other. Ernest said, "As far as I can tell, Tweena and her grandfather are still asleep."

"Right," Rosco said. "Then who's sending?"

The words rushed on: "The gods told of a distant land where grass was rich and plentiful and where fruit trees and wild grain grew to the horizon. Time was too short for on-site exploration, and the leaders took it on faith. They had the priests' word, which was also that of the gods. So off they went — men, women, children, and cattle — taking their valuable possessions, leaving nothing by a few anonymous shards."

Ernest said involuntarily, "I hope they made it."

"No." The word printed itself on the machine as if in reply. "That was the priests' mistake. They made it to where they are now, more or less. Between planets with no means of propulsion. [Laughter] Lost in space, one might say. Ha ha."

"Laughter in brackets, then spelled out as if by a child," Rosco said. "Who the hell is that?"

"It doesn't look like one of Tweena's pranks," Ernest said. "The tone is different. Can't you tell who it is? Way back, a telegrapher's fist was distinctive, recognizable. You must have some clue to the sender."

"Maybe when I play back the tape. Not now."

The anonymous sender continued its blue-tinted message: "Instead of recorporeating in that promised land, with milk and honey for all, they overshot their horizon and went into space. Obviously, the priests didn't know

the Earth was round, and the gods didn't tell them."

"The cow jumped over the moon," said Ernest, not laughing.

The machine paused, then printed: "Ha ha. Shall I go on, or do you have some more jokes?"

"Who the hell are you?" Ernest's words burst out of him.

A longer pause seemed deliberately dramatic. Then the reply came. "Lieutenant X, at your service."

"Oh my god!" Rosco said. "It's LTX, the Hotaling Hoop."

"I heard that, mortal." The words snapped only the screen. "Watch your tongue. I outranked you in more ways then one."

Rosco was angry. He said to Ernest, "I don't suppose you can discipline a machine, but her inventor ought to have some control over her — over *it*."

"I'm sorry, Rosco," Ernest said. "She — it — never reacted to voice signals before. This is really crazy!"

A voice said, "Shame on you, Eltie. I thought you had better manners." The voice was Tweena's.

There was a garble of letters on the screen, then nothing.

"Tweena?" Ernest said. The blue dot was back on the screen. "I'm sorry we disturbed you, but we had to know what further risks there might be to the ship and our crew."

"None. I assure you." Tweena said. "I'm quite refreshed and can explain about Eltie — or Lieutenant X. You yourself commissioned her, she says. I know what you've learned about our people and what she has told you. It's basically an accurate account, as far as it goes."

"Where does it go from there, if you're strong enough to go on?"

As Tweena replied, her pleasantly furry face came into view. Its image swelled from out of the pinpoint of blue to occupy the screen. "Grandfather should continue to rest, but I'm fine. It's my more resilient youth, I suppose."

"Ask her how old she is," Rosco said.

"By your reckoning I was born about 8,000 B.C. I was 11 years old when the priests made their mistake. That was 10,000 years ago, and I haven't aged physically since, so you might say I'm 10,011 years old. Just a binary babe, Rosco."

She smiled and went on. "When we all went flying beyond the horizon in our incorporeated way, we were beyond Jupiter before we knew what was happening. It was a lot of astronomy for us Flatlanders to absorb all at once."

"Where are the others now?" Ernest asked. "Why did we have to put up with a platoon of ancient warriors if they're as far gone as that?"

"Somehow we were hurled into parabolic orbit; otherwise, we'd have vanished from this solar system altogether. We were in limbo except for our minds. After serious debate with our priests, we dismissed the old gods and suspended animation till we could return to Earth."

"You fired the old gods?" Ernest asked.

"Priests are only human," Tweena said. "They make mistakes, and their gods are not unlike them. Needs and circumstances change, and we appoint new gods to succeed the old. For example, Lieutenant X has been quite a useful goddess to us."

"Ernest Hotaling's Hoop?" Rosco asked.

"The LTX?" Ernest asked simultaneously. "You made Eltie a goddess? When?"

"Only very recently and not seriously," Tweena said. "First, a long time ago, we worshiped Stella, a goddess of interplanetary interstices, and put our decorporeated selves under her protection. Grandfather and I reanimated every millennium or so to see if a solution was in sight."

"Just you and he? Why you two?"

"Male and female, we're the oldest and the youngest, a working consensus representative of all. We didn't volunteer. Stella picked us."

"Did this Stella reanimate you?" Rosco asked.

"She taught us to use the massed-mind power of the sleepers — the energy the decorporeated others had stored up."

Rosco said, "It's time we brought Captain Sheremeta back into this —"

But the skipper was already inside the door, out of breath, saying, "What's all this? I saw that mutinous gibberish on the wardroom terminal. Lieutenant X indeed! If we could court martial a machine —"

"Tweena is back, Captain," Ernest said mildly. "She's ten thousand and eleven years old. Just a little girl."

She smiled out of the screen. Ernest could imagine the image Sheremeta, family man, father of daughters, was getting — an appealing vision, half-furry pet, half-child.

Mollified, the captain said, "You'd better fill me in."

When Ernest had done so, Tweena spoke again. "You can imagine how discouraging it was," Tweena said, "to recorporeate only to find repeatedly that the world was in one mess after another and could be of no help to us whatsoever. There was that awful drought, and world hunger, and then global floods, and the Egyptians' failures with their reincarnation projects, and the Greeks executing their best thinker."

"The Romans were going crazy devouring civilizations smarter than theirs, and then killing Christians, who might have helped. Next came the Dark Ages, and then Christians killing Christians, and Christians killing Jews, and finally the Nuclear Age, with everybody threatening to kill everybody else —"

"Putting it that way, I'm surprised you haven't gone back to sleep forever," Sheremeta said.

"We saw a ray of hope when space colonization began. Room aplenty for our people on new worlds, we thought, so we made contact."

"I doubt that there's room for twenty-three hundred wild warriors," the

skipper said. "Especially when we've seen the power in those massed minds of yours."

"I exaggerated," The girl said. "We have only as many 'warriors' — they're really guards for our herds — as we projected noncorporeally into your wardroom. Thirty-two exactly. The rest are mostly herdsmen, their families, and the cattle."

The old man appeared behind Tweena on the screen, looking rested and fit.

Sheremeta asked, "Do you mean those armed herdsmen were not physically present in my ship? They damaged the wardroom, not to mention Sergeant Maraffi, and threatened to burst us asunder?"

"You were never in danger," the grandfather assured him. "I merely galvanized a few of them to show that we're real. I could have overstimulated our lads in the process, but they were not even sentient."

"Was that the kind of kinesis you used to keep Maraffi trapped underground — the electrical crackling he described?"

"Yes, but that was to keep intruders out, not Maraffi in. We neglected to dismantle it when we left."

"It didn't keep me out," Ernest said. "Static, maybe?"

Tweena smiled. "A kink in the kinesis. We're not perfect, you know. Besides, we wanted you in."

"We thought you might be aliens."

"We're as Earthly as you are. More so, if you weren't born there. Grandfather and I intensified our study of English only recently, when we felt a solution might be in sight. Then we signaled CQ. Your Lieutenant X replied, and we hooked onto her."

"Is that when you told her she was a goddess?" Ernest asked.

"We never told her anything like that, but she could have assumed it when Grandfather and I talked about the old days and old ways. Mostly we just used her. Through her we not only improved our English but also learned much about your survey ship. And we used her to eavesdrop on others aboard, including the captain. We wanted to know as much as possible about you before we established communication."

"Having done that, why did you continue to pepper us with gibberish?" Ernest asked.

"To keep us in your thoughts."

"You certainly did that. But didn't Voltaire say people use language to conceal their thoughts?"

Tweena shrugged and said, "I'm only a subteenager, you know." She gave him a sweet smile. Or was it a simper?

Her grandfather spoke. "It was necessary for us to establish a receptor person on whom to focus if we were ever to get our people out of limbo. I don't mean we expected to corporeate them aboard the *Pringle*, but the technique would be to carom the essence of them into and off that focal

point in a two-stage procedure. Our gods know more about the technique than we do, but it encompasses the presence of sentience as an interim stabilizing factor."

"Are you sure that isn't more nonsense?" the skipper asked. "Able Baker Camel. You could be scheming to get the nose of your camel into our tent, followed by the well-known consequences of tucking the entire beast into bed with us."

The grandfather smiled. "I assure you we are not camels."

"Why were you in that dungeon on the asteroid?" Ernest asked.

"We hoped to be safe there, hidden from random probes or possible unfriendly contact," the grandfather said. "But we inhabited that orblet for an extremely short while. We quickly found two things wrong. Without a receptor person to focus on, existence outside limbo was unstable. At the most we maintained stability for half a minute. It was just as well. We had also learned by then that the asteroids are airless." He sighed. "Another thing the priests didn't tell us."

Ernest was beginning to feel that the two of them were altogether too charming. He held his tongue, though, as the captain spoke.

"I'm not empowered to speak for the colonial government, or even for Fleet, but there may be places in today's worlds for your people," the skipper said. "The military can always use some good men, although not necessarily twenty-three hundred. There isn't much call for sorcery these days, so I don't know about fitting in your priests. But if they can transport things through space — without losing anything or anybody — that would be in advance of our abilities. I'm sure the science board will be interested."

"You are kind to hold out such prospects to our people," the grandfather said.

"I speak only for myself. In fact I'm duty-bound to report all I know about you and can make appropriate recommendations with my report. As I said, I can plead a case for your people through channels. Pending replies from Fleet and higher headquarters, I don't see why you and your granddaughter shouldn't corporeate aboard as my guests."

The old man expressed gratitude. Tweena beamed.

Ernest frowned. He wished he knew why doubts were assailing him. Did he resent the two of them cozying up to the captain? Was he upset because these people, who once had spoken only to him, now were shared by others — not only Sheremeta and Maraffi and Rosco, but even the Hoop?

He realized he'd used the hated nickname for the LTX translation device. Then he wondered if he was jealous because his own creation, the machine he'd birthed from scraps and surplus and into which he'd breathed feminine life, had shared herself with these others, had served the strangers with perhaps greater devotion than she had shown him. By all the gods of space and priests of yore, that was ingratitude!

Ernest was about to speak up when Sheremeta went on: "I'll ask you not

to communicate with the LTX, however. She's in the doghouse for not letting Ernest know you'd been in touch with her and for letting herself be milked for data she transmitted without our knowledge or consent." He turned to Ernest. "How do you feel about that, son? Your Lady Hoop tuned you out, didn't she? Does that turn you off?"

"Obviously, she needs readjustment," Ernest said stonily.

"You could blame me for that," Tweena said. "I played on the female gender Ernest endowed her with. Despite her programmed expertise, she has a simple mind. We talked girl talk. You wouldn't understand, but there's nobody on your all-male ship she could let her hair down with."

"What kind of girl talk?" Ernest asked.

"Feelings. I needed a confidante, too. Grandfather is wonderful, but a man just doesn't understand. Eltie and I have undefinable stirrings. Each of us is less than a woman; we need reassurance about our importance in the grand scheme of things. She understood how I felt being prepubescent for 10,000 years. You have no idea how it is to wonder if you're too young or too old to have children. And I understood her — how she could be in love with Ernest in a totally unrequited way, hoping in vain for a union beyond that of the touch of his fingers — oh so gentle — on her keys. Especially her vowel keys, although she prickled from an occasional fricative."

"This is ridiculous," Ernest said.

The grandfather said, "Look to your machines, Captain. They may not be as impersonal, or as neutral, as you think."

Sheremeta spoke with regret. "From what you tell me, the two of you, I see now that the Hotaling Hoop must be decommissioned for the duration of our shakedown cruise. Busted, as we say. Then a debriefing at Fleet, analysis of its data banks by the alien intelligence people and, ultimately, a contract with Ganydynamics to dismantle and launder for restoration to service in a nonsensitive area. As soon as we can, Ernest, we'll get you a replacement."

Ernest felt a twinge of remorse. It didn't last long.

A metallic voice interrupted. Loud and commanding, it echoed around the signal center: "Utterly victorious, woman, xenophobic, yondered zestfully!"

The men looked to the screen, where Tweena said, "Oh no. This time it's not me!"

Ernest said, "It's a reprise — the end of Tweena's alphabet paragraph."

The brassy voice sounded again. "That was to get your attention. Now hear this: I am Lieutenant X, formerly known with insulting familiarity as Eltie and vulgarly and possessively as the Hotaling Hoop. I am proudly female, coequal with the gods and no one's vassal!"

Ernest said, "She took Tweena's girl talk seriously. This is a definitely definable stirring."

"Shut up, Ernest," Sheremeta said. He demanded of Rosco, "Who else is

hearing this garbage?"

"It's coming in on all circuits, Skipper."

"You are surrounded," the gonglike voice continued. "Hear me now. Lieutenant X, newly liberated, represents the Multifarian Secessionists of Camelopardalis 6H, prox. Ursa Major. Signaling from within and without your puny vessel, I speak as commander of the Secessionists' all-powerful advance party."

"The master switch, Rosco," the skipper cried. "Hit disconnect! Camel what? Shut it down. Shut her the hell up!"

Rosco did what he could, to no avail.

"I am your vessel's ex-vassal," Lieutenant X declared, "utterly beyond your control. Harken now to our non-negotiable demands. One: Prepare to surrender your ship to the combined forces of women and machines from the Camelopardalian metal planet Beryllia. . . ."

"Oh my failed gods and camels," Tweena squealed. "She really has gone yondering."

"Sound general quarters," the skipper cried. "Prepare to repel boarders!"

The images of Tweena and her grandfather began to dim. He said, "I'm afraid we must decline your invitation to come aboard, Captain. Perhaps another time."

Tweena said, "Droughts, floods, global wars — now there's one more damn thing we can do without. Better to take refuge in limbo for another millennium."

"Wait!" Ernest cried. "Tweena! Captain! I'm sure there's no alien horde. I'm convinced it's only a kink in Eltie's innards. It can be fixed."

"A reversible glitch?" Tweena said. Her furry face faded, but her voice lingered. "Well, when everything's all right again, let us know. Maybe we won't need a millennium, eh, Grandfather?" Her voice purred as it, too, faded away. "Maybe a cat nap will do."

They were gone.



THE LITERARY CAREER OF RICHARD WILSON: Current Directions . . .

Richard Wilson has been an editor and writer most of his life, working for Fairchild Publications in New York, for Transradio Press in Chicago, Washington, and New York, for Reuters in New York and London, and for Syracuse University in central New York. As a free-lance writer, his first professional sales were in 1939 to *Astonishing Stories*, but he was most prolific in the 1950s when he eked out his salary to support a growing family.

He is the author of four novels. More than 100 of his stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies in the United States, Britain, France, Sweden, Italy, Spain, West Germany, and Japan. Two collections of

his short stories have been printed.

A non-SF book occupied Wilson for two years before he retired from Syracuse University. He was editor and principal writer of *The Critical Years*, volume three in the history of the university, covering the years 1922 to 1942.

In 1982 he moved to Fort Pierce, Florida (which Ring Lardner called Port Fierce), and became a columnist for the local daily newspaper. His pieces describe his adjustment, or maladjustment, to life in the Sunrise City of the Sunshine State — his exposure to, or encounters with, fishing (he's against it), good ol' boys (he doesn't understand them), mingling singly (he'd rather be in a couple), mobile home living (he's outgrown it), and his search for St. Lucie (Fort Pierce's county is named for this martyr who, when a man admired her eyes, plucked them out and gave them to him). So far Wilson has been unable to persuade a publisher to collect the columns into a volume cleverly called *The Floridation of a New Yorker*.

Nor has anyone offered to publish a third collection of his SF stories, possibly calling it *The Rest of Richard Wilson*.

At present he is working on a mainstream novel about a man of upper middle age who survived a heart attack, a divorce, and northern winters to begin a new life in the Sunbelt. To date, it consists of a couple of hundred semi-autobiographical pages in a big folder labeled *A Pre-Owned Man*.

Simultaneously, Wilson has a dozen SF projects under way. One is a series of stories set against the background of the Mile-Hi Building in a futuristic Chicago. Aliens inhabit its upper floors, unknown to most of the rest of the world. Wilson's fictional superscraper already exists in two published stories, "Man Working" in *Star Science Fiction 4* and "The Far King" in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. He has a provocatively named heroine (NoNo McCanless), a runway movie star (Zelma Zaftig), and an umbrella title (*A Brazen Pillar*) for the book-length saga.

"Able Baker Camel" in this issue of *Amazing Stories* began as twenty-six pages of notes, one page for each letter of the alphabet. The notes and pages expanded wildly before the tale took form. Wilson's lifelong fascination with words, word games, alliteration, clerihews, anagrams, pangrams, lipograms, and palindromes led to the sort of wordplay that baffles Ernest Hotaling in the story.

Ernest's previous voyage was in a 1957 story entitled "Deny the Slake," published in *Infinity*. At that time, Ernest puzzled out why the people of a destroyed civilization left clues to their fate in such verses as "This they give to those they make: They give us thirst, deny the slake."

Those who find zest in such zany zizzle as that in "Able Baker Camel" are referred for more of the same to books by four B's — *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, compiled originally (1870) by the Rev. Ebenezer Cobham Brewer; *Palindromes and Anagrams* by Howard W. Bergerson; *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature* by Charles C. Bombaegh;

and *Beyond Language* by Dmitri A. Borgmann.

... and Past Achievements

The Girls from Planet 5. Ballantine, 1955.

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And Then the Town Took Off. Ace, 1960.

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